CANCEL CULTURE

THE COLLECTED STORIES AND POEMS OF KIM CANCER

***** ALL WORKS COPYRIGHT 2023 METHLAB PRESS *****

Contents

STORIES FROM THE EAST 6

SANTA'S GIFT FOR DR. PETER DASZAK 6

LEAVING HUE 24

LIJIAN: PORTRAIT OF A WUMAO 36

FAN BING BING SUCKS OFF THE BOOGEYMAN 55

NIGHT OUT IN WUHAN 68

PERDITION IN BANGKOK 90

BANGKOK DURING THE PLAGUE 110

WHORES AND JOHNS IN BANGKOK 116

LOAN SHARK CAPITAL 133

TAXI RIDE IN SHANGHAI 138

YOU SHOULD FIND A HUSBAND 140

BESTIALITY BRO AT THE ONSEN SPA IN TOKYO 154

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF XI JINPING 167

A WEREWOLF IN BURMA 172

SHANGHAIED!!!! 180

A JUMP TO HEAVEN'S GATE 191

CELEBRITIES IN THE NIGHT 211

THE SENSITIVITY READER CUTS HIS OWN PENIS 215

MOTORBIKES, MOTORBIKES, MOTORBIKES 219

DO YOU BELIEVE IN GHOSTS? 221

JOB AT NANA PLAZA 241

STRANGER IN BANGKOK 286

VAMPIRE DYNASTY **294**
BIG WAVE **296**
FANG FANG'S FRIEND **298**
THE HAZE **302**
HOSTAGE SITUATION (RED RAIN 1) **304**
JUST AS YOU FALL ASLEEP (RED RAIN 2) **306**
BANGKOK SLEEP (RED RAIN 3) **309**
ACCIDENT ON THE OUTSKIRTS OF SHANGHAI **311**
I HAS A BUCKET **314**
THE KAREN AND AXL ROSE **315**
ALIEN IMMIGRATION TO THE IMPERIAL CITY **350**
BANGKOK VOODOO DOLL APP **356**
KILLING MR. POTATO HEAD **365**
BANGKOK BAIT AND SWITCH **369**
IF I WERE A UYGHUR **378**
STORIES FROM THE WEST **382**
#SPOILER ALERT! **382**
GOLFING WITH MICHAEL JORDAN **386**
THE RUSSIAN SNAKE CHARMER **388**
MAN WITH A PONYTAIL **393**
I'VE BEEN SIGNING NIGERIAN SPAMMERS UP TO GAY PORN WEBSITES **396**
BUM BASHING **399**
SOPHIE'S CHOICE **402**
AFTER SCHOOL **408**
LET LIONS RUN LOOSE IN THE CITY STREETS **417**
GENDER FLUID **423**
TERRORISTS ON MONKEY BARS **426**
THE GRASS IS GREENER BY THE GRAVEYARD **428**
HUNTING THE MONSTER **431**
WELCOMING THE JUNGLE **432**
LETTER TO A DEAD MAN **435**
MIGOS SONGS **438**
MOTORWAY TO BRISTOL **440**

HOW TO SPOT A DEAD TREE **444**
DOOR DASH **445**
LOCAL GRAVESTONES BEGIN DISAPPEARING **448**
JOB INTERVIEW WITH AN ASSHOLE **451**
A TALE OF TWO BROTHERS: THE LIBERAL AND THE CONSERVATIVE **455**
RUNNING AWAY TO BHUTAN **460**
SCENE ON A TRAIN **466**
PLAYING TAG WITH THE GHOST OF DWAYNE HASKINS **467**
RHAPSODIZING THOUGHTS **469**
SLOW-MOVING HORROR SHOW **470**
SHANIA TWAIN HILLBILLY NIGHTMARE **471**
KANYE AND Q AT BROKEN CONDOM BEACH **481**
FRIENDS ON FACEBOOK **488**
DEFUND THE POLICE!!! **491**
DUDE! YOU FUCKING PISSED ON ME! **501**
THE TIME MACHINE OF HER THOUGHTS **504**
HOME ALONE KIDS GETS CANCELED **511**
I SHOT MY TEACHER **515**
FEAR OF THE FEAR OF FLYING **521**
MIDDLE SCHOOL FRIEND **524**
SPONTANEOUS OUTBURSTS OF DANCING **526**
THE GREEN BANDIT **527**
JACK DORSEY YOGA DREAM **528**
CONFESSIONS OF AN ARSONIST **532**
PARENTS GOT PISSED ON IN TIMES SQUARE **541**
WE WERE FAGS **544**
HURT PEOPLE HURT PEOPLE **553**
PUNK ROCK GIRL **556**
THE RIGHT PRIVILEGE **561**
ED SHEERAN FAN POLTERGEIST **567**
NO COMPLAINTS AT THIS PRICE **580**
THE ULTIMATE FUCK TRUDEAU SELFIE **583**
WHY I ROBBED A JEWELRY STORE **588**

2002 ..... **594**
TO CATCH A THIEF… AND THEN HOLD THE ASSHOLE HOSTAGE **595**
JEW FOR JESUS **607**
POETRY **618**
YOU! **618**
POSITIVITY IN A NOPE **622**
BARBIE GIRL **624**
CORONAVIRUS PATIENT ZERO **628**
MOON MAN **632**
PERSPECTIVE **634**
HOMELAND OF THE NEW MAN **635**
CANCEL CULTURE **637**

INTRO

This collection is merely a spasm, a drop of creation and ideas into the infinite swirl of the digital universe.

It is a work of art. It is for and by art.

Thank you, sincerely, for reading.

-KC, 4/18/2023

STORIES FROM THE EAST

SANTA'S GIFT FOR DR. PETER DASZAK

"Dark, grotesque figures, in a soundless rage, attacking with the fury of a Florida man...

"Dark actors, leading Mickey Mouse to a prison shanking in the shower.

"Yessir, it was all angles and no curves. The blood hunter's ghost marriage proposal, that anagram in *The Lancet…* All this while the doctor radiated heat, felched by a broken mirror. The doctor's stethoscope and sphygmomanometer taking shape in the steam."

The city's neon panorama was shrinking in the rearview. The river of animation scattered into faint, winking pinpricks of light.

Curving along an empty highway, the Cadillac clattered further into gathering tendrils of mist. The car's engine grinding, like the gnashing of teeth.

Santa Claus was at the Caddy's wheel, wheezing and sniffling. Then Santa squinted, hit the high beams. The air outside was becoming increasingly befogged with a chalky dust, the fog glowing in an almost iridescent whiteness…

"It's wrong on more levels than a broken elevator. I tell you what... The higher up Huang Yanling climbed, the more she showed her ass.

"She just had the worst case ever of the butterfingers. Up and fumbled that Frankenstein dish. Then she pressed her eyes shut, as if in prayer, and hung her round face low… a setting moon... Yessir, you can bet a kidney that a whole long list of exonerating lies went tumbling through her head.

"But little did she realize how many horrible things had already flown out: hatred, hunger, pain, poverty, disease and death. All of life's miseries, let out into the world.

"Just one, just one… one wrong move altered the course of human history. The CCTV footage of that fumble, oh brother! It's up there in the panopticon, somewhere, for sure. Too bad we don't have a Lizzy Salander to dig up that database…. Talk about pictures worth a trillion words."

Santa's nose trickled blood. His jowls hung low, boiling in layers of anger. He had hot, dark rings of pain beneath his blue eyes, and a tangly mess of white hair curled down to his neckline. A silky menace colored his tone as he spoke.

"The Supreme Leader, Brother Snake God, when he got the word, he had the sad face of a chained monkey. Gotta wonder how many messengers he snuffed out, before he sniffed the opportunity, before he fed the demons.

"Brother Snake God did in his dentures, soccer kicked over a row of tombstones, knocking them down like dominos, and then Brother Snake God commanded his

comrades to open the zoo gates, concoct a cauldron of rumors... Yessir, Brother Snake God only chooses people he can control.

“Yessir, Brother Snake God ordered an invasion of cleaners and scrambling dragons. The cleaners shining in the last light of day. The scrambling dragons speaking only in solecisms. Yessir, the scrambling dragons’ truest truths are rarer than diamonds. Their truest truths come fringed in sunbursts of gold.”

Santa’s flushed face creased into a smile. He flashbacked to street art, Banksy-esque graffiti paintings of little people held upside down, by their ankles, small holes bored into their brains. The little people’s skulls dripping egg-yellowy oils into petri-dishes…

“The little people can lap through the water. They can cast misty shadows. The little people run, scratch, and bite, but, in the end, they’re always tripping up like a startled duck,” Santa growled, staring daggers, and a snarl of revulsion broke across his lips. Then Santa stepped on the gas, throttled the engine, revving it like a chainsaw.

“But the world was swaddled, sickly, and it took that honey, wandered in circles. The world carving paperboard cutouts of people... Then Tedros did the duckwalk... The Snakes’ puppets operating with the precision of hornets building a nest.

“Yessir, then there was Charles M. Blow, and Chris Cuomo, Stephen Colbert, all their ilk: the Goat Fucks.

“The Goat Fucks were living through screens, pissing and throwing pennies from atop skyscrapers. The Goat Fucks on opposite sides of smiles, treating scientists’ diplomacy as if the scientists were sending lit sticks of dynamite...

“Goat Fucks pointing guns, leading the blind into caves, mocking the blind’s prostrations… The Goat Fucks expatiating, with Brother Snake God and the Snake-charmers, in bone-white slants, moonlighting and pantomiming emotions.”

Santa paused, momentarily, and as he emptied his heaving chest, his voice strained, “But the blind kept crawling. On their bare bellies. They swarmed, chins wet, under milk-white stalactites sharper than vampire fangs. With a mouthful of batshit, the blind went hiding in corners, shivering as they hugged their knees.

The blind ignorant, unaware of words glistening with moisture. The blind's cries simple as guide dogs. The blind's footsteps followed by speeding trucks."

The wintery sky hung low, hazy, and bleak. A darkening smudge was spreading. Banks of inky clouds swept along by fierce and frigid gusts of wind. The heavens above committing a kind of frotteurism.

"Comb your hair, put on your shades, and dig your bunkers. It was the Year of the Rat, after all… It was endless stretches of greenery, soaring walls in the Kingdom's Garden… Yessir, all the cadres at that banquet had a reclining seat…

"Comrades, cadres at the Gala, smiling and dancing in bursts of illumination. Everything painted red and gold, with bestiaries decorated in grinning rats. Everyone at the Gala, collared in cangues, blissfully unaware of the pedo lurking by the playground."

Santa felt a tremendous force, a searing pain ripping through his chest, and he unloosed a series of dry, hacking coughs. His eyes stretched wide when he remembered that coughing, once, was worse than saying the n-word.

“Throw your head up to the sky and imagine God Himself, hanging upside down, like a bat, dangling and doing sit-ups from the leg of a flying helicopter. God Himself, the real Patient Zero. God Himself, smoking on a mary-joo-wanna cigarette.”

The darkening smudge in the sky started spreading quicker, spilling across the horizon, like an ink stain, racing rapidly in every direction.

“There can be no murder in paradise. I’m telling you. It’s incomprehensible. Inconceivable… Brother Snake God got that smoldering intensity bright in the whites of his eyes, yeah? And he corrected the wrong ideas, right?

“Metastasis? No sir, not in paradise! In paradise there’s only virgins, green grass and positivity…”

Santa had been licking his wounds, was pulling on a Snoop-sized blunt. The fat man had his meaty hand gripped over the width of the steering wheel, and his knuckles were scraped and bleeding.

As Santa was sitting back in the bucket seat, he steered the Caddy with one hand, and a faint clanking could be heard from the trunk, sounded similar to metal hitting a human skull.

Santa coughed out a plume of smoke, clicked his tongue, then went on, “A maze of limestone caves. Sure paid off like a winning slot machine. We had Ron Varra running around with his hair on fire. But he wasn’t credible. He was a crank. A ‘conspiracy theorist.’ Then God Himself, in the gold chair by the fireplace, told us the dead were coming back to haunt the hospitals.”

“Yessir. Now everyone understands that a day is long, and a year is quick.”

Here and there Santa reached over to stroke the pangolin resting in the passenger seat. The pangolin was purring like a cat.

“I’m telling you. This is killing.” Santa continued, his Texas twang breaking. His enunciation clipped. His voice upping an octave. “I’m telling you. It’s never been like this.

“The Snake-charmers used their cunning, inveigled us. They threw ants in the sugar... Ants in our pants… Fed us nothing but bones. They exploited our Restless Anal Syndrome and used imprimaturs to cast spells. Didn’t Marx say something about the peasants being like sacks of potatoes? It’s no wonder the peasants believe in opioids and influencers, Maatje Bensassi and phantoms.”

A hologram above the dashboard flickered on, displayed grainy video of Marilyn Manson pouring milk and cereal into a groupie’s yawning vagina. Then the ghoul dove down, devoured the Lucky Charms like a starving dog.

A moue played across Santa’s face, and his lilt became aggressive, “Yessir, it’s onion heads on the prowl. Onion heads tapping on trumpets. The onion head’s call to arms is telepathy turned telekinesis...

“And we’re slaves, slaves to a type of torpid stillness. Slaves, goin’ batshit crazy in algorithms… Incunabulum, tintinnabulation… Fucking robots building robots.

“Yessir, we all got hoodwinked… It’s the greatest coverup, the greatest crime of our time…

“But few even care. We’re walking crash test dummies. Post-human. We’re Sam Harris, naked and covered in peanut butter, chasing imaginary llamas.

“Yessir, last time I went to California, a homeless lady, who looked like Michael Rapaport, squatted in the middle of traffic, defecated, then threw a handful of her shit at me, screamed something about Gavin Newsom...”

Santa snorted, felt chunks of dried blood trickle down his throat, and sneered with a satirical curl of his upper lip.

“Yessir, the ghosts sure are coming back to haunt the hospitals. The ghosts fighting for air and light. The ghosts pressing their noses against one-way mirrors like trapped rats.”

The pangolin lifted its pointy snout. Its eyes flashed purple. The pangolin had started shaking like a chicken with its throat slit. But now the pangolin was stoic as the dead. The pangolin statuesquely still, the pangolin reflection of a reflection, a picture of a picture. The pangolin daring anyone to pity or patronize it.

“A popcorn bomb plot. A lady in a gorilla mask punching a politician in the face. A ballerina blasting Coca-Cola firehoses at fat children in Kansas. Bill Gates talking like a pirate and terrorizing call centers in the Philippines. A Karen in a death van. A Chinese warship in the Taiwan Straits… A bat cave in Cambodia…. You know Joe Rogan killed the animal’s mother. But we were all pouring gasoline on the delusion, living in a spitfire derecho. We all saw the sad results and no desultory plan. There’s a tracking chip in every electronic device. That’s the true magnet link.”

The Caddy picked up speed, roared past the fresh corpse of an elf. The elf in a snow angel of blood. The elf splattered cold in front of a Waffle House, the eighth ring of Hell. The dead elf’s right arm bent to a sharp curve, twisted like a serpent. The elf’s torso distorted from the impact.

Coroners in space suits were ringing around, in a conga line, dancing in pendulum-like movements, stopping every ten steps to stomp and kick at the elf’s corpse. One of the coroners dropped to his haunches, punched his gloved hand up the elf’s little ass, checked for coronavirus via an anal swab test.

“It’s the Ring of Fire, right? Tin foil hats, bulletproof business suits, and threats of catastrophe. Senators in drag. Damn right the Senators fooled us all, tricked everyone on Twitter, ejected tongues of flame. But, mister, some might say there

are more elves, and the elves are up high, living in the clouds, humming 2 Chainz, 'Beez in the Trap.'

"The elves with a list of grievances long as a man's forearm. The elves sharpening knives in struggling structures. The elves with awareness in their eyes, confidence in their bearing. The elves fixing to fake the Mars landing, play grab-ass with Elon Musk."

The churning mass of black clouds in the flat sky thickened, and there was only a faint glimmer of light toward the north. Santa sure knew a peccadillo when he saw a peccadillo.

"One laboratory, it's all it took. Yessir, Huang Yanling, the 21st century's Gavrilo Princip.

"One lab. One wrong move. One fumble… One spill… Brought the world to its knees. Crippled economies… Took time, trillions of smiles… One lab, gaming functions, slipping Mother Nature the Bill Cosby pills…

"And Dr. Daszak and Shi Zhengli, oh, they're singing karaoke. They're off sipping champagne and stuffing toilet paper into Al Capone's vault.

"Yessir, it was gongs and clouds of smoke and pained voices shouting in chorus when Dr. Daszak tore off all his clothes, set fire to his tennis shoes. The doctor's head swinging from side to side, like the casing of a bell, as he tore off running, his hairy legs pumping. The doctor with the shocking speed of an Olympic sprinter.

"The doctor's feet aflame, two bright balls of fire, twin meteors in the night, as he tore through the streets of Wuhan.

"Dr. Daszak, with a certainty, a concentrated savagery in his sprint… The doctor stopping only to dance in graveyards, with his arms outstretched. The doctor barking at a mid-autumn moon, foaming at the mouth, rabid and hairy as a werewolf…"

The inky, dark scuds of cloud coalesced to form a dense steel-gray mass. The glimmer swallowed whole. The sky gray as a wolf.

Santa rolled the windows down a skosh, let the Caddy breathe. A line of cold air whirred in with a sucking sound, like surf slicking over a slope of sand. The air with a strange smell, something between mildew and medicine.

“Yessir, Dr. Daszak bled the bats, red-handed, with the ceremonious air of a pedophile priest. His was a practice, his was a language of receding gumlines. His was a mouth like a gloryhole…

“Yessir, Dr. Daszak was the Snakes’ fixer. He bought Brother Snake God all the necessary time and excuses, let the broken elevator fall free.

“The Snakeheads… yup, they yanked the seat out before the blind could sit. Then they lost a lung from laughing so hard. The Snakeheads, and their kidney thieves, the world knows they have reeducation camps. But the world didn’t know that the Snakes had their prisoners standing and clapping, cheering the British and American death tolls.

“Yessir, but that Dr. Daszak, he kept an eye out, like Fetty Wap. The doctor elected himself the mayor of a ghost city and was accompanied by thundering drums and exploding fireworks, everywhere he washed up. Just look at the cut of his jaw as he speaks…

“It’s true that we learned more from losing than winning, I tell you what. But our smiles died on our lips.”

The skunk, strong sativa slammed Santa with the force of a flash flood. His eyes reddening, he eased back further in the bucket seat, blew a series of beer bottle-sized smoke rings.

“The Snakeheads knew from November, and they were watching water like a housecat... Yessir, no mock outrage at their booky-wooky coverup. But just as you can’t hide the sun or the moon forever, the truth will find its way.”

The pangolin tilted its head, smiled lasciviously. Santa was feeling especially loquacious.

“The Senators’ thoughts heading into flares, leading into an apotheosis- and it centered on prison labor, rare earths, quiescence, and resting failures… The Senators speaking snuff poetry… The Senators’ teeth shiny as waxed wood...

“The Senators sharpened their box-cutters, said the unions were too greedy. Then the Senators bought stocks and brought in the elves. There were Snakeheads in bulletproof business suits at every step, and yup, they burned hell money, hopped the elves up on melanin and grinch hormones. Ho-ho-ho!

“But the elves saw the light. The elves, these days, have been jumping to a death better than life. The elves bitter as black coffee, the elves review-bombing, lying flat, living in collapsing buildings rather than doing swan dives. The elves sick of bungee-jumping without ropes. The elves having preemptive panic attacks. The elves wielding baseball bats, bashing in the skulls of perfect strangers.

“Yessir, the elves’ hands were bent, burnt, and calloused; the elves’ hands festering, a calligraphy to their scars. But none of that will stop the elves’ surge… No sir… because you can’t really kill an elf. Its energy won’t be destroyed. Nowadays the elves’ ghosts live in almost every machine, and the elves’ ghosts are tiny, too, mere molecules.”

The pangolin peered silently at the mugshot of Dr. Daszak. Santa had glued it to the Caddy’s dashboard. Dr. Daszak’s bald head glistening, a film of sweat over his forehead. The doctor’s face with a look of horror stamped on it.

“I believe in Sharri Markson… Sometimes history needs a push. And really, where are the three workers? Where are the body bags? And just who’s been wearing surgical masks like a holster? It’s game theory, crowns… upskirt camera binoculars…

“The Snake-charmers, they’re spitting in our faces, spitting in the wind. And we’re Theo Von, mullet-headed, weeping while we masturbate. Or so the Snake-charmers think. But it’s not that simple.”

Vapors, columns of illumination and sheets of mist shrouded the distance. Santa tugged his lips into a spastic grimace, and his temples bulged with craggy bones.

“It’s the elves. The elves are unmasking the Snakes’ composition. It’s a code, the patterns of branches, the maps and trees designed for lungs, hieroglyphics written in spike proteins. It’s the electrification of the entire world, the breath of God, the megadeath event... Believe me… the elves will be heard.”

Santa and the pangolin, just earlier that dreary day, had escaped a ziggurat lockup. Crawled up and out a chimney. Caught a hitch in the back of a garbage truck. Then Santa stole a golf club from a Walmart and stalked around the Walmart’s parking lot. Santa with the pangolin perched on his shoulder, like a parrot. Then Santa sang “Silent Night” as he bludgeoned and carjacked a street pimp from Arkansas.

Santa’s irritability was understandable. After all, for two straight weeks, Santa and the pangolin were locked in a small, windowless, low-ceilinged room.

In lockdown, they never slept. The two spending every waking moment forging official documents, using a Ouija board app. The two receiving detailed instructions from a spirit claiming to be the REAL Carlos the Jackal.

Another metallic clank and a *whomp whomp*. Muffled cries echoed from the back of the vehicle. Santa then crinkled his nose in revulsion and stabbed a finger at the dashboard, clicked on Clay Travis and Buck Sexton's radio show.

"They like to think God Himself went and offed us, like He was stomping on a cockroach. But, no sir, He wasn't hanging upside down from Kobe's helicopter."

Santa swallowed the end of the blunt, belched, and set the Caddy on cruise control. His bloated face blanched. Then he reached in the open glove compartment, plucked out another from the pile of pre-rolled blunts.

"God Himself, like Mike Tyson, stomping on your children's testicles," Santa muttered, and effortlessly Santa clipped the blunt in between his thin red lips, bit into the blunt like a hot dog, and then touched his finger, ala ET, and flicked the blunt's tip ablaze, and a string of grayish smoke curled to the sunroof.

"There never was an answer. There were more questions. Joe Rogan killed Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer. Ate the red-nosed fucker alive, raw, like a zombie, as the animal was twitching and coughing blood bubbles… Fucking socialists, Rand Paul's neighbor, they had no problem carjacking me for my flying wheelchair, no sir…

"Yessir, a constellation of factors took place, blew in like a burst of wind against a flagpole. Late 2019, early 2020. The Year of the Rat… The Year of RaTG13…"

"One factor involved Doctor Li, the Wuhan doctor. That man was a patriot. A martyr. A saint. He tried to jump on the dragon, choke out the dragon, put out the fire, before it spread. Before it reclined its seat directly at the world's knees…

"But it was all tithing, totalitarianism, bureaucracy, glass hearts, apathy and antipathy, empathy distress. There were tongues licking blood off the blade. The

lab's disinfection took place in October 2019. But the dragon had flown the cave. Later, Brother Snake God found his clothes, slipped on his singlet, and proclaimed another ban, bellowed out: 'No more towel-snapping hijinks!' But it was too late.

"Brother Snake God, in a wrestler's singlet, forced the doctor into a full nelson, forced the doctor to drink the dirtiest dragon dick blood.

"Yessir, it's one of the fundamental principles of a Leninist system. Whenever the Communist Party is skating on thin ice, it can afford to switch to repression. The greater the difficulty, the greater the potential growth. Any crack could be a big one… Meaning that one could expect episodic jumps in volatility… Meaning that one could expect the Snakes to be highly sensitive and nervous and, ultimately, inactive…

"Yessir, in the before times, in the good ole' days, pre-plague, the Snakeheads just made payday loans and fed America poisoned pet food. Then fentanyl. The latter was revenge for the Opium War. Yessir...

"Then Brother Snake God got ants in his high pants, and he upped the stakes, fed the American children spiritual candy contaminated with razor blades. Then Huang Yanling's epic fumble-rooski… The lady worse than Ryan Leaf, I tell you what…

"Brother Snake God, we know he once lived in a cave and that he ate bat soup. But he was no Ozzy Osbourne.

"Brother Snake God eventually sent the bootlickers and window-lickers to take over the Wuhan Institute of Virology. But it was too late.

"Brother Snake God, oh, he agonized, dug himself a new cave, and hid his puffy, steam-bun of a face for weeks. But then he came to, photoshopped alertness into his eyes. Then he strapped on his high pants, went to work. Brother Snake God's high pants perfectly creased, perfect as folded paper, his pants dark as motor oil. Brother Snake God's high pants just as his eyes and his hair: a most pure, funereal black."

Santa put the pedal to the metal. The speedometer reaching 106 MPH. And, silently, he remembered when he used to impersonate Jesus, back when he had a series of slapfights with African cabdrivers. Then Santa recalled his stint as a fortune teller in a bus station bathroom, over in Hoboken. Santa's always believed in tarot and circumstance.

The pangolin cast a puzzled, sideways glance at Santa as the Caddy passed by a blank highway sign. The blank sign bent, slanting like the spine of an old man. A flickering streetlight silhouetted and lit up Santa's fat face like a strobe light.

Santa stuck a forefinger to his chin, nodded, and unloosed something between a laugh and a growl.

"The death of one... The death of one…"

Santa again swallowed what was left of the blunt and reached into his red coat's front pocket. Pulled out a baseball-sized snowball of cocaine. Licking his lips, he raised his eyebrows like he'd solved a riddle, and proceeded to smack the white ball to his face and snort as much as he could. Then he slurped up the rest and screamed loud as an opera singer.

"I told you a thousand times. It was a popcorn bomb plot. A hijacking of public trust. A switchblade to Mother Nature's throat. But the research went astray. Fauci ignored the fireball in Tianjin. And worse yet, he played with the fire.

"Yessir, the Snake-charmers wore their underwear outside their pants. They pulled out their yogurt-slingers and played Russian Roulette. And after they finished, elf brains were blasted, oozing trails of yellow and red sludge, the elf brains splattered, like modern art. Fucking Jackson Pollack performance pieces over the white walls of that lab. It wasn't as if the French could have built it any better. It took almost two decades for a reason.

"Then we discovered the truth about Nicki Minaj having swollen testicles, an impotent penis, and a sex offender husband. But it was too late.

"I too fear, loathe, love, and ultimately believe in the power of the internet."

The pangolin chewed on a tablet of children's strength LSD. Then Santa ducked down, dug under the driver's seat, and broke out a blood-stained bottle of Laotian rice whiskey. Brushing his long white beard to the side, Santa twisted open the bottle cap with his teeth, spit out the cap, then flipped the whiskey bottle upside down, cradled and chugged it, all whilst steering the Caddy, carefully, with his bare left foot. His chubby, prehensile toes curling over the steering wheel.

With his right foot, Santa was pushing the Caddy hard, ragging on it, throttling the gears, like a racecar driver.

The Clay and Buck Show faded, and Warrant's "Down Boys" came on the bass heavy stereo, the car filling with rock guitars and heavy sounds. Santa bobbed his scruffy face, slapped at the dashboard as if he had a winning hand of Blackjack. Then he rolled down all the car's windows.

Santa shifted his gaze, saw there were zoo animals, lions, tigers, elephants, gorillas and kangaroos, along with the comedian Jim Breuer, the comedian running on all fours, groaning and making goat sounds... The escaped animals in the breakdown lane. The animals pushing forward at varying speeds…

Further on the horizon, another runaway elf had doubled over, was writhing and convulsing in the breakdown lane. A centaur soon parachuted in, sputtering and wheezing, and it pounced, commenced to grind its hooves at the elf's green, puckered face.

"Certain things you do really make me mad…" Santa sang along and then flung the empty whiskey bottle out an open window. The Caddy's four windows sucking in wide columns of cold air. The air taking on a metallic, sulfuric tinge.

The pangolin glanced at the open car windows as if they were the empty eye sockets of human remains.

"Jani Lane was underrated. The man was a genius. The Tarzan of butt rock."

"Whoa, can we rewind to where we been…"

The pangolin squeaked on the leather as it rolled on its side and pawed at the air, like a playful kitten.

“Yessir, there’s nothing wrong with a sissy.”

Milky air, in a patina, thickened around the shape of the vehicle. The lions, kangaroos, and Jim Breuer disappearing, drowning in swirls; the animals becoming stuffed animals, toys for fat kids in Kansas. The animals becoming lost faces in heavy cream, the animals amassing with the miasma.

Santa smashed his left elbow, like a cage-fighter, jabbing at the car’s driver side control panel. The Caddy’s windows creaked upwards, pathetically warbling. The pangolin rested back on its haunches, had the defeated look of a whipped child.

“We’re fixing to find Patient Zero. We’re fixing to find God. We’re fixing to find the culture dish, the mice, the missing millions, the urns, and the grant network. I’m making my list…

“It’ll be the New Normal at the New Nuremberg Trials… It’s Daszak first, then the Bat Lady, the doyenne, then the Wuhan body snatchers. Then the Snakeheads and organ thieves and graverobbing bureaucrats. It’ll be those whose actions spoke louder than words…”

Santa spoke softly through his clenched white teeth. Santa spoke without moving his lips. Santa will always be a ventriloquist.

“And there will be justice for the elves… No more just saying ‘Candyman’ into a mirror…”

The air curdled and tossed droplets, bits of icy spray. The Caddy was getting moist. Its windows misty and slick. The air’s viscous composition further greasing.

But the Caddy was undeterred, kept cutting forward. The Caddy barreling, nose first, veering off the highway, roaring onto a bamboo path.

Santa brushed his hands over his bloodshot eyes, struggled to summon a smile.

“Crazy Train” then came on the Caddy’s speakers, and Santa cranked the stereo up louder than a jackhammer… Randy Rhoads’ guitar riffs rattling the car…

Breaking through a flimsy cardboard barrier, the Caddy swerved into the mouth of a white-water lake. Santa squinted, tried to recognize a ridge in the surf, where dark, curving humps were rising to the water’s surface.

The Caddy’s engine screamed. The vehicle pushing further, digging deeper into the ivory depths.

Stony atolls appeared, rising like dragon’s teeth. Off in the distance chalky sediment had formed a delta, a wedge-shaped landform. An island of an island.

Further afar, the misty outline of a wave kept creeping closer, and closer…

The car nosed forward, slicing through the white waters like a knife through a birthday cake. The Caddy a spoon plunging into a bowl of yogurt. The car soon flooding in loose wet clumps, rippling burbles.

But the Caddy kept its centrifugal force, kept careening onwards.

Cream-white swamp-waters splashing, flooding the vehicle’s interior, foaming above Santa’s waist. Slick, ice-cold eels slithering in, encircling Santa’s marbled legs...

But Santa was undeterred. And Santa stoically manned the wheel, like the captain of the Titanic. Santa focused as a shaman. Santa’s intentions set in stone. Santa driving forward. Santa up to his buttery neck in the water’s chill, its hardening churn.

The pangolin then floated to the surface, sleeping like a shark. The pangolin a dramatic character for the cereal.

Santa grinned, crookedly, and cried out, “God Himself, an agnostic. God Himself, the biggest misanthrope of all… There’s no murders in paradise… No murders in paradise…”

As the cream rose, it numbed the passengers, like the purest cocaine. The bathtub waters increasingly argent and rising over Santa's bloodied nose. Santa's bushy white beard then gathering, folding like a funeral shawl over his round, bruised apple of a face.

Santa then juddered and swam, stomped even harder on the gas pedal. Santa splashing at the milkshake waters. Santa flailing, until he was blinded by a crushing sheet of ice.

The pangolin, ride or die, resorted to doing the breaststroke. Then the pangolin capsized, its black belly protruding upward.

And now Santa knew, exactly, his plan for everything... Be it contemptuous amnesty, merciful oblivion, a towering wave, or just a shadowy blur...

"And the last thing was hope," gargled Santa, underwater, his limbs spreading, stretching like a starfish, as the music suddenly stopped.

LEAVING HUE

Red flags were plastered and hung everywhere around the train station…

I'd come as a flashpacker, heading out on the Reunification Express line, train #SE4, from Da Nang to Hue.

The train ride was sold as beautiful, and it was, aesthetically; known as one of the world's most scenic, jaw-dropping train routes, it lived up to its reputation.

Train tracks snaked through lush jungle, and gazing out the window, I peered out at the tropical, verdant mountains, rugged streams, and sinuous valleys of the Hai Van Pass.

Straddling the pass were the lapping waves of the South China Sea, their undulating, yale blue waters bubbling and foaming into squiggly shores of eroding rock and bronze sand.

Aside from spotting a gun tower, it was generally hard to fathom that a place as picturesque and serene was once a conflict zone, a place of unspeakable barbarity, carnage.

Communism…

The train itself was more what I would have expected. It was run-down, utilitarian.

My train seat was hard, though it was sold as the soft option. Sitting in it numbed my lower back, legs and ass.

A tiny cockroach scurried by my feet. I wondered, that if sentient, would the cockroach be communist or anti-communist... I couldn't see it being apathetic or apolitical. Not after 300 million spins around the sun…

Cigarette smoke wafted its way through the carriage. A middle-aged Viet in high-riding blue jeans, a white "same same" t-shirt and shiny leather shoes poked his head into the space between the cars, coffin nail dangling from his lips.

Disinterested rail employees in blue uniforms sold snacks and water, and without any hint of irony, a hammer and sickle were embroidered on their carts' moneybags.

One train employee sat in the seat next to me for a time, watching a historical drama set in Nguyen Dynasty, on his phone, without earphones…

The scenic surroundings gave way to urban sprawl as the train arrived in Hue city.

Seeing the red star flags, hammer and sickles, portraits of "Uncle Ho" everywhere had me thinking communism, thinking in confabulations, perhaps due to my indoctrination as a child in the US school system of the 1980s.

But, in fact, in 2020, I'd discovered through observation, conversations with locals and browsing online that Vietnam is probably the most capitalist place in the world…

Everything is to be sold. Anything can be bought.

Human organs. Human beings included, if you have the right connections.

Regulations, laws take a backseat to cash.

There are little to no environmental regulations, at least that are enforced. Garbage, leaves, plastics are burned on sidewalks, in front and backyards of houses, apartments…

The traffic, roads are Darwinian, more of a jungle than anything in the Mekong.

There's little to no social safety net. It's every man, woman and child for themselves.

Government cash flow flows into a super small, select few. The rest of the masses are left to fight for scraps.

If not for the strict censorship, monitoring of media and draconian anti-drug, anti-porn, and anti-vice laws, Vietnam would be a libertarian utopia.

This Vietnam, the Vietnam of today, is communist in name, power structure, and superstructure only...

I'd come to this communist turned capitalist utopia as a solo traveler, trekking through the center of Vietnam, to Hoi An, Da Nang, and, finally, Hue.

Unlike us Americans, the Vietnam War, or, as the Vietnamese refer to it, "The American War" isn't much on the minds of the local people.

Unlike America, where we still discuss, pain over it, refer to unwinnable conflicts, quagmires, warzones, and general dumbfuck foreign policy as "this or that Vietnam."

Unlike America, the Vietnamese don't think much of it, aside from learning about their victory over the Americans in schools.

Aside from that, they don't spare a second (or first) thought when walking or riding their motorbikes by a decommissioned M-46 towed field gun, or a captured US warplane or chinook helicopter with its belly, its ballast cemented into the pavement out in front of a government building or museum…

I'd grown up in the 1980s, in the long shadow of the war, when Vietnam, the war there, remained etched into America's recent memory.

It was a stigma, a trauma.

A festering, open wound.

As a nation, we had collective PTSD.

There were those I knew, personally, who'd returned from the front lines, and I'd heard their stories...

Like an uncle of mine who'd served, taken a bullet in the ankle, was honorably discharged.

Every single night since the war, for years afterwards, he'd been plagued by night terrors. Vivid dreams.

Him back in the green, trudging through the caws, echoes and marshes of boobytrapped jungle, his friend, Derrick, in tripwire; the whoosh of a bamboo whip; the young marine writhing and twisting on the spikes, his eyebrows upcurved, dark blood curdled in his mouth.

My uncle, in his dreams, would hear those wretched gurgling murmurs Derrick uttered, as mortars clapped and colored the sky.

Every night he'd see Derrick's face in a deathmask.

Every day, my uncle's limp, tottering gait served as a reminder.

He'd taken to smoking reefer to calm his nerves. He and my dad, staying up late into the night, watching baseball, puffing joints and laughing.

It was the only time he was happy, my uncle, when he was stoned enough to forget…

And there were those I saw but didn't know, who'd returned from the war.

The homeless vets.

My neighborhood was dotted w/several homeless veterans, sleeping rough, shellshocked, unable to function in society.

I'd see them on the street, faces blanched, cracked eyes and 1000-yard stares.

Cardboard signs asking for money and food.

Jingling Styrofoam coffee cups full of loose change.

American flags hanging from their shopping carts…

There was a constant stream of movies I'd seen on cable, late at night.

Apocalypse Now, Full Metal Jacket, *Rambo*.

Assorted B-movies featuring yellow people, commies, being shot or blown to commie bits by someone w/a mullet or Chuck Norris or someone resembling Chuck Norris or someone resembling someone resembling Chuck Norris.

And I'd watched documentaries, news footage in grainy color, bloody bodies hurried away on stretchers, that little Vietnamese girl napalm victim, her ghastly gesticulations and nudity, and helicopter crashes, John McCain, prisoners of war in tiger cages, carpet-bombing planes and ejaculating flamethrowers, buildings aflame, charred thatched roof villages, bullet-riddled, burning and burned bodies, amputees.

That was my idea of Vietnam. A warzone, a panoply of destruction, a hot rainy jungle hell of death.

Not my superlative vacation destination…

And that was my idea of communists, communism.

Warfare, alongside starvation, bread lines, death. Siberia. Nukes. Steely grimacing vodka people in furry hats.

Boat people. Boat people in Miami. Bay of Pigs. Schoolchildren ducking under desks. Gorby and that big birthmark on his head. The Berlin Wall. Crises.

Yellow people in jungles, jumping from trees, armed with long knives, stabbing and slashing Americans. Female snipers shooting at Matthew Modine, Animal Mother and Cowboy.

A world of shit…

Communism was the Evil Empire, everything that was evil.

As a child, growing up in the last decade of the Cold War, I'd learned to hate everything communist.

(Being called a "commie" in school was even worse than being called a "faggot.")

The fucking commies wanted to fucking nuke us, and wanted to do other horrible things to me, everyone I knew. What those horrible things exactly were, I didn't clearly know. But I did know they were horrible...

However, eventually, communism, its fiscal methodology, lost. Capitalism won.

Colonel Sanders turning out to be America's finest commander.

America's bankers and corporations finishing off the mission in Vietnam, decades later…

The Cold War was won. The Iron Block fell. The USSR collapsed. China became mercantilist. Laos, while still authoritarian, opened to business. Cuba is slowly opening.

Only North Korea remains true red communist, Stalinist, and even it's got its own thriving underground commerce, markets, and may one day follow the PRC into mercantilism…

Although I'd been in Asia awhile, traveled extensively throughout the continent, because of the mental image I had of Vietnam, because of the war, communism, I'd always had an aversion to visiting.

Even though a few friends, coworkers had loved traveling in Vietnam, praised and recommended it highly, I still couldn't bring myself to go.

I felt guilty, shitty. About us inflicting so much death. I especially felt ashamed after learning about "Agent Orange," and how that affected, and continues to affect, veterans and locals alike.

Then on a trip to Australia, I had an unavoidable connecting flight that was delayed, making it necessary for me to spend 48 hours in Saigon, or, as it's now known: "Ho Chi Min City."

Contrary to my expectations, preconceived notions, learned wariness, I loved it!

The buildings. The cavalcades, waves of motorbikes. The electric, buzzing and chaotic streets. The freshest fruits, vegetables; the banh mi, pho noodles and yummiest milk coffee concoctions I'd ever tasted.

(Ever had an egg coffee? Salty coffee? Or coconut coffee? Well, dear reader, you should!)

I was taken aback by how friendly, talkative, and welcoming the people were. How wired the city was. Every little café, corner restaurant, mom and pop noodle spot having a WIFI router, the password posted on the wall or table. The net speedy too.

I'd even met and had sex with a tour guide. A Vietnamese girl. Never could I imagine that I would have, technically, had sex with a communist, had sex with a member of the communist party. But I did.

(And it was glorious!)

Vietnam certainly was, still is, as of this writing, a developing country, with nagging issues like wealth inequality, traffic safety, pollution, corruption.

But, to me, an outsider, a casual observer, a dilettante, Vietnam, with its large young population, looks to be on the verge of- something.

What, I don't profess to know, exactly. But it is something…

I'd later happily visit Hanoi and Phu Quoc, finding friendly faces, culture everywhere, like the fabulously well-preserved temples and fascinating traditions, such as the elaborate rituals, celebrations, colorful robes, dances of ancestor worshipping ceremonies and holidays.

And I'd had fun strolling the night markets, which were bathed in sweet aromas of fruits, seafood, coconut pancakes, local snacks, and the super fragrant, ubiquitous sandalwood incense burned nightly in hopes of conjuring good luck.

(Fortunately for Vietnam, unlike Cambodia or China, there wasn't anything akin to the Khmer Rouge or Cultural Revolution, and many time-honored cultural traditions remain intact…)

As for the "American War," while there, it wasn't on my mind a lot.

Sure, in museums I'd seen relics, fragments of bombs, landmines, torn blood-stained clothing, radios, walkie-talkies, journals, ledgers used by the communists, to coordinate the war effort and guns and knives used by Viet Cong to kill determinate and indeterminate numbers of French, Americans, Koreans, assorted enemies, "soldiers of the puppet government," but these displays about the "American War" mostly made me sigh, shake my head in dismay.

(It had been educational, enlightening, though, to see the war from their eyes, their perspective.)

((To them, as was stated in a video display, a "martyr's epilogue," spoken by a Vietnamese commander, a battle-hardened, gravelly voiced communist, with twin tufts of scraggly coal black hair and a fierce face, who, forehead furrowed in deep folds, emphatically proclaimed the war as "their American Revolution.")

(((It was a narrative I'd not heard before, their side; it was a story that, perhaps, should be told in American schools, not because it was right or wrong, but because they had their reasons for fighting, and as Americans, as participants in that war, we should, from an epistemological perspective, be aware of it…)))

However informative, nothing I saw affected me, that much, on a personal, emotional level.

Until Hue.

Hue had one of the bloodiest battles of the war.

During the "Tet" offensive, in the small hours of the night, a fierce ambush was launched by the North Vietnamese communists and their affiliates.

The communists captured the city, but after a protracted battle, featuring urban warfare, house to house combat, heavy street gun battles and sniper fire, the Americans won back control of Hue, their victory declared in an emotional flag raising ceremony, hoisting Old Glory in front of the Citadel…

It dawned on me that visiting Hue, for someone a generation or two ahead of me, would be sort of like visiting Fallujah, for anyone in my generation…

As for the city, the Hue of today, it's amazing, aside from trivial developing world annoyances like a handful of obnoxious touts, the worst being motorcycle taxi drivers constantly passing by and barking "marijuana, marijuana, lady, lady, boom boom."

(A common Hue scam where an unwitting foreigner will try to buy weed or a hooker and find himself arrested, having to bribe his way out of jail. The motorcycle taxi driver and corrupt police working in tandem.)

And, of course, the traffic safety issues, literally taking your life into your feet anytime you crossed the road, attempting to dodge the mobs of motorbikes streaming by like missiles, or navigating the sidewalks full of street vendors, construction rubble, large piles of dirt, debris fires, and garbage.

Developing world stuff, basically.

Other than that, the city was highly enjoyable, gorgeous, the riverside area, specifically, when lit neon at night.

All along the Perfume River were roistering young people from the colleges nearby, and many buildings built in art deco architecture, painted pastel.

My personal favorite landmark had to be the Saigon Morin Hotel, with its elegant French colonial architecture, rectangular face of quintuple rows of French doors and small glass pane grids, wooden-framed windows, and wrought iron balcony railings.

True architectural eye candy.

And one must traverse the visually dazzling remains of the Imperial City, see its pavilions, gates, eaves, frescoes, gardens, and stone bridges, as well as the nearby emperors' elaborate tombs, the various towering pagodas, and one must ride or drive around the surrounding countryside, gander at the sprawling green jungle hills in the distance, which were magnificently photogenic…

But I couldn't get past the battle there.

Thinking of those soldiers, young bucks, 18, 19, 20-year-olds, thrown into that situation, them running in the muck, gunning "commie" motherfuckers down and themselves falling bloody to the earth in hailstorms of bullets, exploding in improvised bombs and wanton mortar fire, being picked off by snipers in the same very streets I walked as a tourist.

So many people, just so many fucking people, had died there.

There were over 1000 Americans dead or wounded.

Not to mention the ARVN, its over 2000 dead or wounded, and the occupying NVA, VC massacres of civilians, commies chasing down runaway Catholics, those hiding in churches, those friendly with the Americans and ARVN.

The communist death squads swarming into villages, executing every boy/man over the age of 15, bodies chucked and stacked in shallow mass graves.

The communists had their mass casualties, too, in the end, numbering thousands. Death tolls, to this day, that are disputed…

I couldn't shake the images. What it must have been like. The heat, horrors, stenches of death.

It was in the starkest contrast imaginable to the present city, its youthful energy, cafes and colleges. Hard to truly envision that sort of calamity happening in this effervescent, wondrous place…

When it came time to depart, I had my guesthouse arrange a ride to the Hue airport, and after checking out, I was met by the driver, a man about 60 years old.

He was approximately 5'4, thin, and sprite. Had charcoal black hair, small eyes, and a round face, reddish cheeks, thin lips and a slight smile in the right corner of his mouth.

Though his accent was strong, his English was overall pretty good, and, setting off in the car, we struck up a conversation.

"Where do you come from?" He asked, honking his horn musically at the other motorists and motorbikes that weaved and crisscrossed, buzzed like mosquitoes around our vehicle.

"America," I said, not thinking much of it.

But he was more excited than most I'd met there to encounter an American.

"Oh, America very good! Very good!" He exclaimed, his heightened voice having a raspy cigarette cadence, and he gave me an enthusiastic thumb's up with his free hand.

He proceeded to tell me how as a child he lived near the MACV compound.

American soldiers, aid workers had taught him English. His family and friends of his family were soldiers in the war, fighting on the side of the South, The Republic of Vietnam, alongside the Americans…

He said that when the Americans were in Hue, it was "very happy, a very happy time."

We drove along and he pointed out landmarks- where the MACV compound was, soldiers', locals' late-night hangout spots, and bunkers, flashpoints in the battle…

I was curious as to what happened after the war ended, what happened to those in the city, in league with the Americans.

He told me they, including his family, were forced into the countryside. The communists repopulated the city.

It was nearly a decade until they were able to live inside the city again.

He'd also lost track of his father. Through a network of those in similar straits, he'd been promised that his father was alive, but could never locate him...

The driver had been one of the "boat people," attempting to flee Vietnam, in various boats, rafts, makeshift floating contraptions. He attempted to reach Hong Kong, several times, but on every attempt his boat was fired on by Vietnamese soldiers or otherwise intercepted, forced back…

When our ride began, he'd told me that "before, many people were against the communists, but now they are good."

But as we approached the airport, he showed me something he'd written on his phone and didn't want to say aloud.

"Communists tell lies."

Then he wrote:

"Killing many Catholics. No freedoms."

His withered face, the lines in his forehead like couplets of the pain he endured, made me cognizant of this forgotten bunch, the Vietnamese on the same side as the Americans, fighting with us, believing in our ideals, wanting freedom.

I'd always seen the Vietnamese War as being an interventionist adventure. I'd seen the angry hippies at peace rallies, the burning draft cards. I'd seen the movies.

I'd seen it as binary. Us against them.

But it wasn't so simple.

I'd heard the American narrative of it, growing up, and having spent time in Vietnamese museums, I'd seen the Viet Cong, communists' narrative.

To hear this side of the story, this firsthand account, from this man, who'd lost his father in the conflict, been banished from his home, had tried to sail a boat to Hong Kong, and was nearly killed in the waters by the communists, the Vietnamese territorial guards, it was gripping.

This man's story moved me, affected me far more than any movie or museum exhibit...

And, standing in the immigration line to have my passport stamped, I wondered, what the future would hold for this country…

Would The Party be able to maintain power into the new decade, into the 2030s and beyond, with all their children growing up, online, in a globalized world?

Before my visit, they'd begun imprisoning bloggers, like Mother Mushroom, and other dissidents at an accelerated rate, and during my visit, the BBC was banned in Da Nang, Hoi An, and Hue, unable to be accessed without a VPN.

Was this a snit? A blip? Or might The Party attempt to copy the China model, reverting to totalitarian ways to assert total political control, using technology to police its population, becoming a tech-based police state…

I don't profess to know.

Because I'm not a communist.

LIJIAN: PORTRAIT OF A WUMAO

—

Jia Lijian was born and raised near the city of Ruijin, a city known as the “Red Capital” for its important role in the beginnings of Chinese Communism.

From an early age, Lijian learned to love China. Raised by his grandparents, he’d sit in rapt attention, his knuckles to his chin, his eyes widening as his grandfather told him patriotic stories. His grandfather, after all, had fought in The War to Resist America and Assist Korea.

His grandfather, who bore an uncanny resemblance to Sun Yat-sen, would sit across from Lijian, in the jaundiced light of their living room, smoking cigarette after cigarette, sipping baijiu and regaling the child. His grandfather, the raconteur, at his most animated when telling war stories.

Leaning forward, speaking with the force of a fortune-teller, the old man’s bushy white eyebrows would lift, his voice would crack, and his thin silver caterpillar of a mustache would tremble as he told tearful, harrowing stories. Stories of living in caves, eating tree bark and snow, and trudging, on frostbitten feet, through the icy muck of night. Stories of crossing the Yalu River to launch mortars at US

soldiers. Stories of killing and gutting imperialists with his bare hands! All for the love of Mother China!

In addition to telling his patriotic stories, Lijian's grandfather instilled in him the habit of morning reading. Every morning, Lijian would wake to the rooster's crow at dawn. Then he'd push himself out of bed, and rise to his feet, pick up his grandfather's tattered copy of Mao's "Little Red Book," the pages slanted with age, and he'd read aloud, 10, 20 pages at a time, reciting the words loud enough to be heard, but not so loud as to wake up his grandparents sleeping in the adjacent room of their courtyard house.

In primary school, middle school, high school Lijian devoted all his time to his studies, studying, for up to 17 hours per day. His favorite subjects being Marxism and Mao Zedong's writings and speeches.

By the end of high school, although he diligently studied for the college entrance examination, his scores were inadequate to gain admission into a truly elite university, such as Peking University or Fudan. However, he did well enough to attend a 2nd tier university located in the suburbs of Shanghai.

While his desire was to study Political Science or Chinese History, upon entering the college, he was assigned to be an English major. An English major? Everything about that bothered him. He hated English. After all, it was a barbarian language. The language of the colonialists, the imperialists, the enemy nations he'd grown up despising, like the UK and USA. Those horrible countries full of dirty, smelly, stupid people.

However, since he was a proud member of the Communist Youth League, he wouldn't be making any waves. He wouldn't be risking his good standing by questioning the college's decision or entering the lengthy process of requesting his major be changed.

The more he pondered it, the more he realized that it shouldn't be a surprise. He'd always aced his required English classes. All throughout his schooling, he'd found it an incredibly easy language to master. In comparison to Chinese, it was child's play. Only 26 letters. Ha! Chinese has over 10,000 characters! To him, the imperialists' language was much like the imperialists themselves, much like every

Western nation he could think of, backward and inferior to China in every single way.

He'd also been a huge fan of Wang Yi, long admiring the handsome, distinguished man's poise and character, and he'd listened in awe to Comrade Wang's perfect English. Lijian started thinking, imagining himself in a role like that, in the foreign ministry. He could be on the world stage, speaking at the UN, speaking to the world on behalf of Mother China.

Maybe English wasn't so bad after all. Perhaps he could work at CGTV, *The Global Times*, or *China Daily*. There were many possibilities, so he threw himself into his studies, and began his attack on the evil, inferior language!

二

"The Oral English Teacher, Wilson Edwards"

Despite studying at a 2nd tier college, Lijian was highly impressed by his professors. They were all party members. And they were fluent in English, most speaking with clean, clear British accents. In contrast to many of Lijian's classmates, who'd sit slouched, sleeping or playing on their phones during lectures, Lijian sat in the front row of every class, sitting upright, straight as a bolt, hanging on his teachers' every word.

There was one class, though, he detested. His Oral English class. And this was because it was conducted by a man named Wilson Edwards. A foreigner. A cockroach of a man! It was actually the first and only foreigner Lijian had ever met. And the foreigner was just as disgusting as Lijian could have imagined.

The foreign teacher Wilson was a middle-aged white man who'd show up to class in rock band T-shirts and dirty, rumpled blue jeans, flip flops. In addition to the man's slovenly attire, his appearance was also suspect. He had a hulking potato of a nose, fleshy bags under his electric-blue eyes, and a receding hairline of scruffy, dandruffy, salt and pepper hair. He was thick in the waist, too, with a floppy beer belly hanging over his belt, protruding so far that if he were a female, he'd probably be mistaken as pregnant.

The foreigner often smelled of liquor and did nothing in the class except sit in a chair at the front of the room, playing children's games with the college students. Pin the Tail on the Donkey. Duck Duck Goose. Simon Says. His most earnest attempt at teaching would be to write a word on the blackboard, in a childish scrawl, often misspelling words, then attempting to have a conversation with the class, about the word, the stupid slob sitting down and asking, "So do you guys like barbaque?"

Worse yet, most of Lijian's classmates were girls, and for some unexplainable reason, the girls LOVED their foreign teacher. They'd laugh hysterically at everything the teacher said, as if he were a comedian. They'd even smile and snap silly selfies with him. It all made Lijian sick. Sick! Did the girls need new glasses? Did they not see what a dog's fart, what a scoundrel the man was? What was he even doing in China, teaching Oral English? Why wasn't he back in HIS country?

Everything about the class made Lijian's blood boil, had him hot with resentment. He'd rather skip the class altogether, do something more useful with his time, like studying Xi Jinping Thought or Marxism. But he knew the college monitored attendance, and he couldn't risk losing any morality points. He couldn't and wouldn't risk anything that might imperil his future party application.

☰

"A Girl Named Dou Dou"

There was a beautiful girl in a few of Lijian's classes. A girl named Dou Dou. She was unlike any girl Lijian had ever seen. Not that Lijian knew much about girls. Truthfully, Lijian never had a girlfriend and had never even touched a girl.

Back in his village, boys outnumbered girls by three to one, and most of the young women left town early to work in bigger cities like Nanchang, so even seeing an

attractive twentysomething lady was rare. That, of course, changed when he arrived in Shanghai. And at his school, he was smitten by the numerous young beauties he'd see on a daily basis.

Especially that Dou Dou. She was beautiful as a movie star, with her porcelain body, white jade skin. Her opal eyes big as an anime cartoon. Her jet-black waves of hair trailing down to her shoulders. The heavens smiling on her flawless form as she'd wear the clingiest skirts, qipaos…

Mesmerized, he'd glance over at her, in the classroom… How he loved the girl's painted face, her makeup. Her heavy flicks of mascara, various shades of eye shadow. Her candy-red, pouty lips. Her pink-pink cheeks reminding him of candy. And oh, oh how he loved the sweetness of her scent, how she was perpetually perfumed…He'd imagine her whole form, her whole body somehow made of sugar…

Mao Yeye have mercy! The girl was incandescent, poetry in motion, a work of art!

Lijian pictured Dou Dou as a descendant of Diaochan, one of the "Four Beauties" of ancient China. And like those ancient beauties, he averred that Dou Dou had a face so stunningly gorgeous it could sink fish, eclipse the moon, entice birds to fall from the sky, and put even the prettiest flowers to shame.

Lijian secretly developed a heart-pounding crush on the girl, imagining the two marrying. Dou Dou, on his arm, in a brilliant red and gold marital qipao. The two having children, several children, several chubby little bundles of sunshine. Lijian proudly doting on her, but not uxoriously. Lijian and Dou Dou, high-ranking members in the CCP, living in Zhongnanhai, living the Chinese Dream!

But he was never able to muster the courage to approach her. Worse yet, he felt his stomach sink when he started seeing her clicking on her dagger high heels, her hips swaying as she'd saunter up to Wilson, the dufus foreign teacher, after every class. The girl all smiles, giggling, tilting her head, and chattering away in her perfect English. The girl speaking with nearly pure pronunciation, sounding almost like an actress in a Harry Potter movie.

It drove Lijian mad, sent sizzling gusts of anger down his spine. Lijian seeing that girl, talking to that disgusting dog fart of a man. Even if she was only making nice to ensure her grade would be high, still, it roiled him.

Eventually his crush on her evaporated, when he spotted the foreign teacher and Dou Dou, strolling through campus together, smiling and chatting. Standing outside the library, Lijian's skin crawled, then his face twisted in disgust, and he

froze in his tracks, glaring down at the two like someone would stare at dogshit on their shoe. He then figured she must be a prostitute and lost all respect for her.

Simultaneously, he grew to hate the foreigner, even more, when he noticed the foreigner must be around 180 CM, far taller than him, at 168 CM. Lijian pictured himself as his grandfather, in the War Against America in Korea, Lijian blasting a mortar at the horny white baboon and the whore, then chuckling as the two exploded in a firework show of bloody body parts and black smoke.

It wasn't as if there weren't other girls in his class. So what if she were the prettiest. She was a whore, he thought, a traitor to her country! Lijian started imagining her, arm in arm, with that hairy white baboon, the two stepping into a dingy, dark and smokey hotel room. Dou Dou on her back, legs spread, her trading sex for grades. Certainly grades, or maybe a poorly written recommendation letter, would be all the baboon had to offer. Certainly, by the looks of him, he couldn't pay, financially, for her "services."

Lijian hacked and spit on the ground, silently cursed the wretched pair! The both of them worth no more than a glob of spit!

四

"Nearly Every English Major Female, Nearly Every STEM Major Male"

Lijian was surprised at first, and still, it made him somewhat uncomfortable, that his class was nearly all girls. Out of his class's 100 students, there were only 5 boys. In most of his subjects, he was one of only two or three boys. Aside from Lijian, always in the front of the class (with the sole exception being his Oral English class) the few other English major boys would often sit nervously, huddled next to one another, in the farthest reaches of their estrogen-filled lecture halls and classrooms.

Lijian couldn't figure out why, why there were so few boys in his class… Why was it that, in his college, boys and girls were separated by majors? Nearly every English major was female, and nearly every STEM major, Business major was male…

The girls at college appeared so different from those at his high school, too, appearing more like K-pop girl group stars than college students. They had long hair, short hair, curly hair, hair dyed every single color of the rainbow.

Instead of loose sweatsuit-like high school uniforms, many wore low-cut shirts, short skirts, short shorts, silk stockings, fishnet stockings, tight jeans, thigh-high boots, and stiletto heels. Some had breasts the size of watermelons. Some had glittery painted fingernails almost as long as cigarettes.

And the makeup, like Dou Dou, many were caked in makeup, blazing red lipsticks. He'd never seen such girls, girls looking like that, aside from in music videos and films.

Lijian would find himself, late at night, in his dormitory room, with the curtain drawn over his combo desk/bunk bed, at times unable to sleep as he'd fight to resist his impure, immoral thoughts of the girls in his class, the girls around campus. The carnal thoughts flitting through his head. His lewd ruminations swinging on a mental jungle gym of images, images of girls, images of his classmates' slender bodies… The images occupying, tormenting his mind.

Especially his immoral thoughts of Dou Dou, who'd sit in front of him in the Oral English class. Dou Dou, goddess-like in her aura, the sweet smell of her perfume curling into his nostrils. How the young girl would lean forward in her seat, exposing the tip of her lacy panties.

But he'd persevere! Vanquish the impure thoughts tormenting his psyche. He'd flashback to the cool fall day. Standing atop the massive jaw of bone-gray concrete steps, outside the campus library, looking down and watching the baboon, Wilson, and Dou Dou, the pair ambling together, smiling and clucking under the yellowing leaves of autumnal trees. Then he'd remind himself that she was a whore. A white-worshipping whore!

Then he'd silence his mind with the soothing sounds of patriotic PLA songs, Chairman Mao and Chairman Xi's speeches, and comforting images of hypersonic missile attacks on US warships, nuclear attacks on Japan.

Once, when experiencing impure thoughts about Dou Dou's body, Lijian found himself remembering the Soviets' "honeypot" traps.

But no! NO! No, not here! Chinese would never resort to such heathenry, he assured himself. While Lijian loved Stalin and Lenin, he often looked down on most of the Russians, especially that rat-faced Gorbachev. Lijian thought of most Russians as only one step up from British and American scum. Thought of them as pathetic losers for abandoning the glorious cause of Communism, for betraying Socialism…

But then he'd be calmed again, thinking that the collapse of the USSR was further proof of the superiority of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics, and of China's superiority over all other nations! Lijian becalmed himself knowing that China, Glorious Mother China, and its illustrious 5000 years of history would always be NUMBER ONE!

Despite his heartbreak, disappointment in Dou Dou, Lijian persisted in his efforts to learn the imperialists' inferior language. And he was successful, even winning a speech contest and an essay contest in his first semester, the only freshman to ever accomplish that feat.

It was days after he'd won the essay contest, and its ¥1000 prize (which he'd immediately sent home to his grandparents) that he received a text message from his department chair, summoning him to a meeting, saying someone very important wished to speak with him.

五

"The Wumao Whisperer"

When Lijian arrived at the meeting, he was shocked to see his classmate, Dou Dou. The girl was stone-faced, had worn a looser-fitting dress than usual. Next to her was the department head, Comrade Hua, a mousy, rake-thin, middle-aged man with shifty eyes and hollow cheeks. The man had skin dark as oolong tea, and a high, slanting forehead. His slab of coal-black hair was combed to the left and appeared heavily gelled.

Assessing his physiognomy, Lijian suspected Comrade Hua hailed from in or around Inner Mongolia.

Standing between Comrade Hua and Dou Dou was a well-dressed, vigorous-looking, 40ish man. He was tall, handsome, had a cinnamon glow to his skin, and was stiff jawed, flashing a crooked smile of pearly white teeth. The smiling stranger wore an impeccably pressed, spotless white collared dress shirt, and crisp black slacks that were perfectly hemmed.

Further to Lijian's surprise, as he entered the room, everyone spoke in English, and only in English.

Comrade Hua addressed Lijian first, his voice a fit of hushed, raspy bursts, "Lijian, I am sure you are familiar with Comrade Dou Dou. She is head of the school's Communist Youth League."

Suddenly, it made sense to Lijian, why he'd seen the girl with the foreigner. She wasn't a whore, after all. She was a spy, keeping tabs on the devil, protecting Mother China! Lijian felt a rush of shame surge up into his throat, like vomit, and his cheeks flamed in embarrassment. He was ashamed he'd ever questioned her, thought so poorly of her.

"This, Lijian, is Comrade Zhang. He is from the Shanghai Municipal People's Government."

The two shook hands and Lijian lightly bowed his head in reverence. Then Comrade Hua motioned for everyone to sit in the office's chestnut-brown, synthetic wood chairs.

Comrade Zhang locked eyes with Lijian and spoke in an almost staccato rhythm. Hearing the Shanghaiese-inflected high and low pitches of his accent, Lijian could tell the man was a native of Shanghai.

"Comrade Lijian," Zhang said, his hands clasped, his expression turning dour, "As everyone knows, we are in a new day and age. The age of information. Everything is online. Everyone is online. Everyone is locked to their phone. Discussion, debate, information, everything is electronic. The digital space, the internet is a new front, a new battlefield. This is not hyperbole. It is a war. A war of narratives. A war of information."

Comrade Zhang paused, squinted his eyes, and leaned forward, closer to Lijian, close enough that Lijian could smell the scent of cigarettes on his breath.

Comrade Zhang then went on, "This, this is a war China must win."

Lijian nodded intently. From the very minute he'd lain eyes on the man, he'd been enamored. This man was everything Lijian wished to be.

"Comrade Lijian," Zhang continued, "we have reviewed your essay, 'Why China is the Greatest Nation in the World,' and we have diligently examined your classwork. You write very, very fluently in English. In many of your writings, you could be mistaken for a native speaker of this language."

Blushing, his cheeks turning hot pink, Lijian modestly glanced down at the floor, shook his head. Looking at his worn Anta tennis shoes, he then peered over at Comrade Zhang's sparkling wingtips, then lifted his gaze to again meet Comrade Zhang's steely glare.

"We want to recruit you. We have a mission, a mission to explain China's side of the story. It is a mission to advance China's place in the world, to rejuvenate the Chinese nation, to restore our nation to its rightful place."

Lijian was already sold. He'd do anything asked of him to help advance China's causes.

"We will provide you with a new phone and computer. On each, you will be set up with a VPN. It is a software that will enable visits to hostile nations' websites. You will log on to these sites, register accounts, and then comment below the articles. The articles hostile to China's interests and reputation. You will also be required

to join Western social media sites, Twitter, Facebook, Reddit, YouTube, and there you will participate in discussions, refute the enemy's scandalous verbal attacks on China."

Lijian nodded his head intently, bobbing it almost like a pigeon. As Comrade Zhang leaned toward him, he spotted a gold pack of Xiongmao cigarettes in Zhang's breast pocket.

"We will send you the talking points. We will also show you the ways to disrupt conversations. You will be sent links to articles, by us, and you will also be expected to search for the hostile social media posts and articles. Every comment you make on social media posts, or articles, you copy and paste, you keep log of, and you will return to us, every week."

"For each word you write, you will be paid 5 mao."

So it was true, Lijian thought. They do pay posters for their online comments. He'd heard rumors but didn't know they were true. Now he knew.

"But do not aim for quantity. Remember that we will monitor your online behavior. We will monitor every of your post, every of your comment. Aim for quality. The higher quality comments can earn larger compensation. Compensation can be 10 renminbi a word."

"When we send link to articles, we also send important points for you to stress, abide. Be sure to abide the points."

Lijian again nodded, pursed his lips.

"But we must warn you, Comrade Lijian. The things you will meet on Twitter, on comment sections in the New York Times, on the Reddit, others, it's…" Zhang paused again, this time taking a longer pause, and Lijian heard a faint clicking coming from the office's wall-mounted air conditioner.

Comrade Zhang then shook his head, scowled, and took a deep draw of air. Then he continued, "it is scandalous. The filth. The terrible things they say to smear our glorious nation. You will see terrible, terrible slanders. The worst, most unharmonious ideas, the most incorrect ideas, things that will make the stomach turn, things that will make you want to puke up your rice. Comrade Lijian, can you

handle this? Are you courageous enough to accept this difficult, yet honorable, and crucial task?"

Lijian stood to his feet. His posture straight as a soldier's. His face hardened into a mask of determination. He then cried out, "Comrade Zhang, I am ready!!"

六

"Women in the Chinese Communist Party"

Not only was Lijian stoked to serve his country, he was also elated to have an excuse to speak with Dou Dou. Her status had not only been restored, but had been elevated, in his eyes, after he'd learned of her efforts, her persistence in the struggle.

And now, they'd be in frequent contact, and he'd be within mere meters of the goddess, her perfect body… her sugary, peach-soft skin…

It'd turned out, too, that she was Comrade Zhang's niece, had been recruited that past summer, and had already been writing online comments for two months.

After the meeting, they left together and Lijian kept his gaze fixed on the floor, struggling to maintain eye contact with a girl so beautiful. He felt his heart thumping, his pulse racing, his mouth dry as sand. Walking down the administration building's long gray hallway, the cold air of the concrete building slapped at them, and as they padded toward the elevator, Dou Dou told him that their team would consist of two other English majors, along with International Trade and Marketing majors.

Dou Dou was the first girl Lijian had ever really talked with. In school, primary, middle, high school, and even at college, the boys and girls mostly sat strictly segregated by gender, on opposite sides of the classroom, opposite sides of the cafeteria, opposite sides of student association meetings. Some interacted, and there were a handful of couples, but the majority maintained their distance, remaining pathologically shy around one another, almost to a crippling degree...

Dou Dou wasn't shy, though, like most of the other girls. She was outgoing, plain-spoken, and, when talking with Lijian, she carried herself more like a man. It was this forthright nature that began to set Lijian at ease, but actually, in a way, he found it turned him off. He didn't appreciate her assertiveness. Watching her bark orders, to him, felt emasculating, and lessened the sting of her beauty, to the point he began to view her, more and more, as a man.

His crush on her again evaporated. Though, unlike before, he respected her as a comrade. He thought of Chairman Mao's teachings on women in the Party. And, in Lijian's eyes, Dou Dou, Comrade Dou Dou, became just another warrior in the struggle.

七

"Coming from a Position of Strength"

The online commenters' introductory meeting was held in the evening, in a small study room at the university's library.

There were 8 people, including Dou Dou at the meeting. All except Dou Dou were males. Dou Dou, again, was in a loose floral-patterned dress. And this evening, she wasn't wearing makeup. For a split second, Lijian didn't even recognize her.

Dou Dou, standing with perfect posture, stalked toward the head of the table. Carrying herself like a TV show host, she called the meeting to order, presented each participant with a sparkly new smartphone and a sparkly new laptop. She told them that each device was equipped with a VPN, and then launched a PowerPoint presentation on how to use the VPN, as well as showed them how to log into their database, where articles were assigned, comments logged, memes and talking points distributed.

Then Dou Dou demonstrated. Her laptop hooked up to a projector, she logged on to Twitter. There were gasps in the room, jaws gaping as the group saw the forbidden foreign website for the first time. They'd seen screenshots of tweets but never had seen the real, live site. Lijian felt his stomach clench.

Dou Dou brought up a tweet listed by their database. An English language tweet posted by a Japanese Foreign Ministry spokesperson. Then Dou Dou demonstrated to them how she'd respond, word by word, along the lines of the talking points. Afterward, she showed them how to post the tweet.

Then it was time to get down to business. A trial run. The 7 boys arched in front of their glowing laptops, all of them tweeting on the same post that Dou Dou had just replied to. They all followed the talking points yet reworded their statements.

The boys' eyes bulged as they tapped furiously at their keyboards, and Dou Dou circled the room, hands clasped behind her back, watching the crew work.

八

“Wumao’s Words Deadlier than a Virus from Fort Detrick”

Lijian took to commenting like a fish to water. He'd already been doing so, anyway, on Sina, in Chinese, leaving supportive comments on international news stories involving China. But this was different. He wasn't preaching to the choir any longer. He was broadcasting to the world! The whole world! And he felt honored to be serving his country in this capacity.

On weekends, evenings, after completing his school assignments, he'd sit hunched over his designated phone or laptop, his shoulders up, his tongue clamped between his teeth. Often, he'd send 15 to 20 tweets per day, comment on 10 or 15 Western newspaper articles and Reddit posts. On a rainy day, with little homework to complete, he could perhaps send 40 tweets, hit 20 to 30 articles and Reddit subs.

But it wasn't always easy. As Comrade Zhang had warned him, some of the articles, commenters on social media were indeed horrible. They made his skin crawl. He hated them. He hated everything about them. He hated the names they'd call him. He hated their intentionally mislabeled maps, and the terrible things they'd say about his beloved country. He'd feel nauseous seeing them posting mocking memes, puerile pictures of his dear leaders.

Sometimes their libel would even seep into his dreams. He'd have nightmares or be unable to sleep, his mind racing, his mind like a dripping faucet, the revolting foreigners' ugly words on endless repeat, running across his psyche like subtitles on a screen.

Sometimes he'd shake in revulsion, imagining the backward, drug-addicted, gun-toting barbarians, their flabby asses mushrooming over their seats, their greasy fingers, their fingers the size of sausages, their fat stupid fingers stabbing away at their phones. The dogs! The stinky, sloppy, disease-ridden filth in their ugly cities, with their crumbling infrastructure and their collapsing buildings! The corrupt capitalist, democratic, reactionary scum!

Nevertheless, he would not be deterred. He would insist on carrying on in the struggle! While his roommates were playing computer games, lying flat, laughing at their own farts, Lijian was online praising his Motherland!

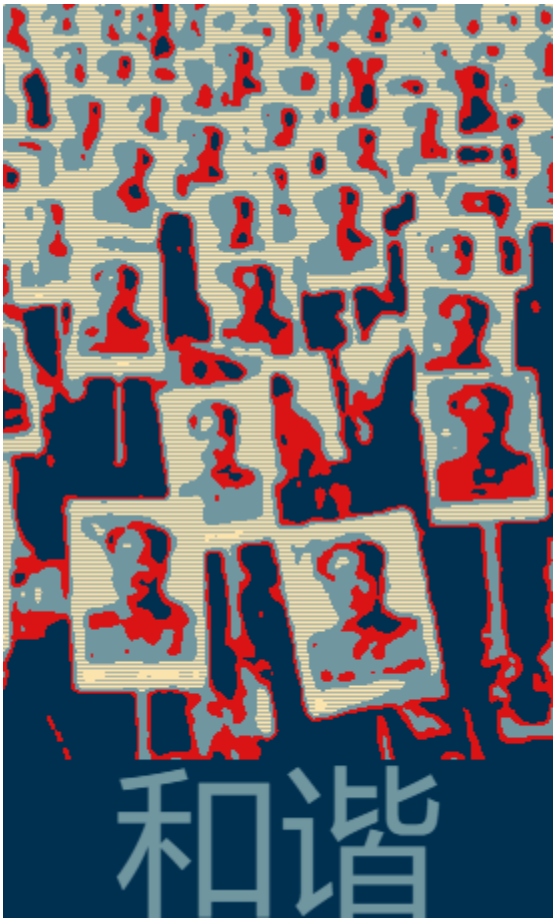
And while most of his roommates had uncles, relatives in the Party, plenty of connections, Lijian knew that he did not. Lijian knew that if he were to rise through the Communist Party, it must be according to his own efforts. If he were to collect enough money to buy the suitable house and the car he'd need to attract a wife, he'd need to strive. If he were to collect enough funds to pay a dowry, pay for a wedding, pay for three children, pay for the care of his elderly parents, he'd need to fight. He knew he'd need to struggle to make his mark, impress his superiors, and gain his face. And this, this on his family's honor, he would! He would!

He was a man on a mission! He pictured himself as an online warrior, like a digital version of his favorite film, Wolf Warrior. That was him. He was a wolf warrior. He was shooting down naysayers! His words deadlier than a virus from Fort Detrick! His words sharper than a guillotine!

He pictured using this as a steppingstone. Eventually, he'd rise through the ranks of the party. He'd marry a girl as pretty as Dou Dou. A girl as pretty as her, but a girl more to his liking. A girl who'd stay home, taking care of their children, their home, and his aging parents.

This was his Chinese Dream. One day he'd realize it. One day, he'd be like Wang Yi. He'd be speaking at the UN. He'd be meeting with foreign leaders, advancing China's interests.

One day, Lijian would realize the Chinese Dream! He would! He would! This he knew more than anything else!!!!



FAN BING BING SUCKS OFF THE BOOGEYMAN

As I click to download *Lost in Beijing*, I hear a bitch whisper, “The opacity of the system...” Sitting up in my hospital bed, I shift my gaze, see that the ward’s corridors are empty, save for a nursebot beeping down the hallway.

Terror swarms my mind, and I get sudden chills as if an ice cube is sliding down my spine. My skin starts crawling as I sense wild tigers congregating, the animals readying to run roughshod through the hospital, crash through the maternity ward’s doors. Fucking eat babies alive.

I suck in a series of deep, healing breaths. Then I steady myself and swipe to watch an instructional video about how to survive a tiger attack. Covering my phone's screen are intrusive ads for books concerning "Xi Jinping Thought." Then I receive a text from an unknown number, saying to "go kick rocks." My phone then becomes a big sticky bar of chocolate melting in my hands.

I knew what to do.

I rip off my gown and IVs, wires, causing a prolonged beep. Then I lift out of the hospital bed, assume a crane kick pose, and with gusto I shriek, pivot, and jump kick the air. Then I teleport to a pastoral landscape. On an infinite gravel road. I'm in a tiger print pressure suit and running on all fours under a blazing sun. The rocky ground is scorching, hissing under me. It's like I'm running on hot coals. The sun's charring my helmet. A river rushes nearby.

A clear glass-windowed slaughterhouse pushes up from the ground, jutting tall as a mountain before me. In It, I see workers in space suits hacking at carcasses and assembly lines of boars and tigers being felled one by one. The slaughterhouse smells of livestock and the muddy grounds ringing it are sloppy, wet…. I rise to enter…

I hear glass shattering. Through an exploding cloud of debris comes a clown car, the size of a Smart car, crashing down from the second storey of the slaughterhouse. The clown car blaps down to the muck before me. Its tinny engine dying with a cough. Swarms of doctors, all in white lab coats, stream from the clown car's doors, climb from its trunk and out from under its hood.

The doctors' faces are severe. Furious. The doctors' faces crumpled and full of deeply etched lines. The doctors' saggy faces rising and falling as they form a circle around me and start chanting the name of the fallen movie star "Fan Bing Bing."

Each of the doctors is lighting, smoking cigarettes. The doctors' circle moving as closely as possible without forming a mass. Behind the doctors appears a flickering hologram that reads: "Hot Water"

Then I see why the doctors are chanting Fan Bing Bing's name. The disgraced movie star appears in a halo of gold, descending from the clear blue sky like a

fallen angel. Her gorgeous face is halved by a toothy, beaming smile and her teeth are straight and ivory as piano keys.

Flanking Fan Bing Bing is a battalion of dancing grandmas, falling from the sky, about 50 of them, in tiger print pajamas.

Fan Bing Bing is in frilly black lace lingerie. A nimbus of long, frizzy, jet-black hair frames her deep black eyes, and her eyes shimmer, are resplendently aglitter, shadowed in gold, sparkling heavenly in the hot sun. Landing softly, she stands tall on all ten toes, firm in the muck, and turns her sweet smile toward me as she shines with a celestial, eternal joy.

But I sense pain in Bing Bing's popping eyes. They are eyes of agony. And I marvel at the curl, the set of Fan Bing Bing's cherry lips that remain stretched to smile.

"In a land where the government outlaws God, Google, crypto, witchcraft and sorcery, what's left to lose?" Fan Bing Bing inquires, lifting her plucked, crescent-shaped eyebrows, and behind her is a wild-eyed doctor with a leather whip, the doctor chasing after and lashing a dancing grandma.

Fan Bing Bing nods, then gigantic, pillar-sized cigarettes shoot up from the earth, like stalagmites, and form a Stonehenge-like circle around the doctors' circle.

Another doctor crawls up from the muddy ground, like a corpse escaping the grave. The doctor with broken fingernails, a long, greasy black ponytail, and unsightly patches of facial hair, almost like a leper. The doctor lurching in a threadbare, dirty lab coat. The doctor raising his gnarled hand, holding up and thrusting forward a tattered copy of *Xi Jinping Thought*. The book appearing smeared with spackles of shit.

Then more doctors trudge forth, break the circle, jump up and down. Bing Bing's face thickens to a scowl as many of the jumping doctors sink and disappear into the muck.

Fan Bing Bing's cherry lips stretch into an even bigger smile and she chortles, "the hidey hole of both propaganda and effective altruism."

My mind blazing, Fan Bing Bing pours more poison in my ears. Tells me telepathically that she knows these doctors are compromised. The doctors' brains are full of bugs. Their beds full of bugs. Bugs crawling into the doctors' ears, noses.

Bugs in the buttocks. But Fan Bing Bing's been setting bug traps, practicing a Parthian Shot.

The doctors are joined by the dancing grandmas and they form a tight circle around me and Fan Bing Bing. Start to clap. Chant. The grannies shouting Cultural Revolution slogans. The grandmas', doctors' eyes red as traffic lights. Then they sweat profusely. Sheens of perspiration, sweat spreading, lines of liquid wetting their lab coats, tiger print pajamas.

Fan Bing Bing hears and knows. The dancing grandmas. The doctors. Their blotched faces, tremulous cheeks. Their ugliest deeds and dreams. The sunshine and darkness intertwined, locked in their heads, tangling in their souls.

Bing Bing knows high rises, living on balconies. Barbecuing civet cats on a hibachi grill. Buying a new Bugatti just to set it on fire… Burning paper money and paper iPhones… Black-tooth doctors on made-up holidays, atop weird buildings, emptying buckets of piss and shit on square-dancing grandmas… Belt and Road debt trap diplomacy…

Fan Bing Bing knows…

Bing Bing knows doctors, like cadres, speak in acronyms and long yawns. Yes, Bing Bing detests the doctors' handwriting, the sound of their karaoke, but is awash, adrift in their oceans of knowledge. After all, she too exists in a lingering mist. Today's Fan Bing Bing no longer exists only at glittering, curvilinear angles.

The grandmas' primal screams, the doctors' claps reach a thundering applause and drown out the tigers' roars, boars' groans and incessant death clangs of the slaughterhouse.

Bing Bing seizes up. Her cheeks flush, her forehead reddens. Her eyes are red-rimmed. Her heart fluttering like a vulture's wings. Her breasts heave. Her bony knees tatter. Her whole soul possessed by the retired Red Guards' gut-wrenching cries, the doctors' applause. Shedding distorted tears, Fan Bing Bing begins to melt like a candle.

The doctors' skins shift to silver, blue, and the applause hushes, as Fan Bing Bing and then the grandmas dissolve into clear puddles of gasoline in the muck. The slaughterhouse beginning to stink like a gas station.

Then the doctors, like a Greek chorus, warn of Chairman Xi Jinping's successor. The successor, the heir to the Dragon Throne will be a King, they lament. A mighty King to be reckoned with. A King like a God. A sixty-five-foot-tall Chairman to be feared, loathed.

My mind working into overdrive, I jump into the air, ascending like a basketball player readying to dunk. I'm flying away as the slaughterhouse bursts into a ball of fire and the doctors are kicking, punching, tipping over the stalagmite cigarettes, the stalagmites falling faster than dominoes. Then I see the doctors, big as ants, igniting into phosphorescent flames like the lit gas burners of a stovetop.

Further on I fly, the hot day melting into a dank, sweltering evening, and I'm soon soaring into a more remote darkness, furthering into a windy, moonless night. Then I see red dots in the distance, like fireflies in the dark.

A metropolis on the horizon is spreading out before me. Its downtown skyline looming through a line of haze; its skyscrapers flashing like lights under ice. Infinite rows of neon-lit towers blinking through the hazy expanse.

A booming, computerized bitch voice suddenly speaks from the sky. "Blood on the hands that'll never wash off… Jeremiads in the *Global Times* are just waxing whimsical... The opacity of the system is intentional… Everyone on Weibo knows…" The computerized voice then disappears, is swallowed into the smoggy night. Then an immense, funneling cloud from a nearby smokestack practically blindfolds me, leaving me unseeing.

I dip, descend to street level, where I again encounter Fan Bing Bing.

"Crucify! Crucify the cunt!" cries Bing Bing. Fan Bing Bing, true to her words, is crucifying a dead bat to a shuttered SARS2 testing booth. Bing Bing, ever the Impaler, hammering the creature's tiny skull with the tip of a high-heel shoe and a golden nine-inch nail.

Bing Bing grins. Her head twisting, like an owl, to a 180-degree angle. Bing Bing putting her face parallel to her back. Then she makes eye contact with me and says, plainly, "Crucifixion breaks the spirit of even the darkest flowers."

Her voice lacks any intentional callousness, and through this, a passcode cracks.

“Doomsday prepping Mojiang for more crucifixions, I see…” I reply, ready to skulk off to the shadows. Then I skip my way down an empty side street. Only a robot street cleaner is small in the distance. Saliva starts pooling in my mouth as I smell woodsmoke and chestnuts roasting.

“Mojiang is where the future King of China went to confer with astrology. Where he ate tiger penis hot dogs and drank bat blood. There, Bing Bing can manufacture astrolabes. Practice nighttime passages. Hatch schemes to enhance the opacity of the system, prep for clandestine asset seizures. Get her good name back,” I hear a bitch whisper.

“Fan Bing Bing might have been tattling on dissidents, greeting government guys with handjobs instead of handshakes. And maybe she was hiding wild boars in the janitor closets of the Jade Buddha Temple. But she swears she won’t ever again be taken down a peg, not simply due to tax fraud. And she’ll be nothing like the pangolin breeders… Spiders that eat each other in a jar…”

But nothing could exactly augur what Fan Bing Bing would encounter in Mojiang, a bitch could surmise. Up until her demise, on account of a highly public tax fraud ordeal, Bing Bing had lived a successful life and had never seen so many ants in a maze. The masses she knew were unknowing. Only the occasional kinesis. Only hearty laughs and butt slaps…. But only Fan Bing Bing’s blood in the petri dish could truly enhance the system’s opacity…

“Follow the money!” I bellow, my pressure suit’s boots still blackened with muck. Then I dash, running angrily as a rugby player. Then I halt to practice the animal attack video’s defensive maneuvers, practice kicking away a wild tiger. But instead I knock over a curbside card game, enraging a pack of pot-bellied, flat-topped, shirtless middle-aged Chinese men in jorts.

The men are agog, scream bloody murder, and chase me for a block or two before running out of breath. The men hacking, spitting, and wheezing, and their bombastic words, caustic shouts, fade into the sticky night like plumes of cigarette smoke lifting into the sky.

“Medusa, Peng Shuai in my thoughts and my prayers,” I mutter through clenched teeth, dash down a side street. Then I stumble unto a garbage dump fronting a bay. The bay’s waters curiously pinkish, practically the color of a dog’s belly.

There, I set sail in a garbage can full of freshly cut body parts, fashioning Fan Bing Bing’s most elegant evening dress as a sail. Then I plow into a harnessed fog, rowing the boat with a severed arm.

A bitch whispers, “I’d have more than imagined Bing Bing to be a maiden truckling to social harmony.”

“But that was back before, pre-SARS2… Before the backdoor deals with barbarians and the collection of wild boars. Before Bing Bing was known to run on all fours by the Bund… Fucking police, polite society had never seen a movie star licking and biting the proletariat and bourgeois alike…”

Bing Bing is again with me. Riding shotgun in our garbage can junker.

“Success was red. It was the Chinese Dream. A chimerical, secondhand concept. We had such prosaic thoughts. We were ambulatory, plodding, and answering signs,” I shriek at Bing Bing, who remains a hand hiding a face.

“You climbed the wall, Bing Bing. Your camera phone had circular eyes, bunched balls of knowing. But who is watching YOU through that phone camera? Who is listening to you, through your phone’s holes? Was it really the PSB? Or was it Mark Zuckerberg, all along, dressed like a raccoon? Your internet, your phone’s lights speak another language,” I continue, still failing to register even an inkling, let alone a wave of emotion.

“But the messages…” Bing Bing finally retorts, and she slaps herself in the face three times. Right hand to left cheek.

“The messages required recondite signals, paronomasia, and ellipses lingering. The messages were littered with loaded questions, strawman social justice and interpolated food photos.” I answer. Bing Bing’s eyes retain a childish limpidity, her bloody lips redder than wine.

Bing Bing harumphs, averts my gaze and mutters something about, “WeChat might as well be ransomware… It’s intentional…” and then keeps silent.

We dock our garbage can junker at an archipelago made of hard, crunchy plastic.

A large sign hanging from a fake palm tree reads, “No Commiserating Anywhere on the Archipelago.”

“Noted,” I concur, helping Bing Bing out of the garbage can.

Bing Bing has shed her bra and panties due to new laws in China governing women modeling lingerie. Her nude, lean, hourglass form is flawless. Not a wrinkle, tube of fat, cellulite patch or any imperfection in sight.

Noticing my ogling, Bing Bing clucks and her eyeballs turn black as a tar road. “Perfection is an imperfection,” Bing Bing chuckles and feints a crane kick.

We run up the promontory of the archipelago, arriving at a jungle. The swampy air stinks like burning plastic, and the bay’s breezes freshen and bite, turn hot as an oven. Then the sky darkens deeper as thunderheads rumble in. The thunderclouds full of silvery vapors shining like freshly cut jewels.

“Fucking monsoon season,” I grumble.

A stuffed, dead elephant at the entrance of the sweat-dripping jungle had been spray-painted with the warning: “No Empaths Allowed in the Jungle.”

“Laissez faire,” Bing Bing retorts.

We’re met at the jungle’s entrance sign by a deathly pale eunuch in a red robe emblazoned with golden dragons. He’s tattooed to the ears and appears hairless as a dolphin. His bald head bright as a crystal ball. His hook-shaped eyes are translucent. They are eyes filled with souls and transmigrations. He begins to tell us of blood magic, superstitions, rumors, luck and Xi Jinping Thought. Such an approach is emblematic of the jungle’s eunuch policy.

To Bing Bing it's predictable as a simulation. Hack, spit, smile. Smile and bitch dance. Rinse and repeat.

Up to 6 times per day. Morning readings. Reciting Xi Jinping Thought. Squat, shit on the floor, blame all ills on Western Imperialism…

"Euphonic grunts, invisible anthills… shapes and sizes, sweet tastes and fragrant smells. Salt and soap. Caramel and dirt. Opium, gunpowder, fentanyl and fireworks. Rinse and repeat," and I understand an unusual symmetry in the eunuch's eyes.

The eunuch finds from Fan Bing Bing that Xi Jinping's successor has yet to be chosen and that the Chairman had been cloned and had crafted his own archipelago.

"Artificial islands in the South China Sea were just the start…"

The Chairman and his bloated, constipation face, his laughing to burn. His largesse joking the core. "It's a gas!" screams the eunuch.

The eunuch slashes the sky with a "woot, woot!" and tells us the Chairman probably sent a flying panda head to follow us from above, "like TikTok, the stars or the moon."

"Chairman knows best," quips Bing Bing to the eunuch. "What we thought was a star peeking through that sloppy sky could actually be the Chairman's flying panda head."

"After all, a flying panda head is harder to spot than any spy balloon."

"And quieter than dissidents, or the bitch whisperer."

We then see there's a gaping hole in Bing Bing's chest, right where her left tit used to be. But before I can ask anything, Bing Bing is lifting into the air and jetting off like Iron Man. Bing Bing vanishing fast, a funnel of fumes shooting from her ass, forming into a glittery chemtrail. Bing Bing an itty bitty speck in the night sky.

"Tits, dicks, chips, ships and a tech war…"

“The smart money is always on tits…”

Bing Bing has anger, Baidu, The Great Firewall and hurricane lights to guide her. Whenever she’d escape her cave, she’d drink bat blood mixed with baijiu, run on all fours through the countryside. Or she’d hit the jungle. Or Shanghai. Where she’d walk along the Bund for hours, aimlessly, in meditation. Bing Bing watching light beam off skyscrapers... Or Bing Bing could play urban golf, in Pudong, with a severed arm and a dead cockroach... Or go for jungle cricket, watching stars aglitter in the trees, swatting mosquitoes with camera sticks... Or she’d dress like a whore, prostrate at the Jade Buddha Temple, imploring the Chairman not to apply tax laws, to overlook currency violations, and to truly enhance the system’s opacity…

Bing Bing reappears, rockets from out of the bay, like a submarine. Then she hovers above the pinkish water’s surface, shouts, “The opacity of the system is WHAT?”

“Intentional!” I rejoin, shouting with the intensity of a soldier. Then the sky opens. A deluge dropping from the heavens, fat raindrops of pure gasoline spattering the jungle’s marshy ground.

“Grandpa Mao in the shower…” the eunuch spasms, bellows. His face a mask of fear. His stocky body, his wealth belly convulsing as his fingers and toes shapeshift into lit cigarettes.

Then the archipelago, jungle shake, boom, and burst into a blaze of flames...

Bing Bing’s left tit grows back, faster than microwave popcorn, and she scoffs, leaves the eunuch for dead. But me and her teleport. Then run the streets of Shanghai, blood dripping from her painted, Freddy Krueger fingernails.

“Blood on the hands that’ll never wash off…” Bing Bing chortles.

As we run under the neon lights of Nanjing Road, Bing Bing slashes throats and gouges the eyes of cripples, beggars, tea touts and random scammers. Then she

stops and stabs a cigarette-smoking traffic cop. Gouges the fucker's eyeballs. But she goes unseen as a ghost due to her invisibility. After all, she is a fallen star. Fan Bing Bing fucking free as oxygen!

Bing Bing brings me to a public bathroom. "Let's meet the bitch whisperer," laughs Bing Bing. Her laughs hit my ears like cleansing immolations, and she cuts a bloody smile into her lips while staying invisible.

"Four visits of New Year's Past. Ghosts. Pigs, Snakes and an Ox. A Rat... Pandora's Box… Everyone on Weibo knows the opacity of the system," utters Bing Bing, her lovely head thrown back, her black hair a blur, her cherry lips lip-syncing plans to recreate the MH370 disappearance.

That was it, she knows. She knows the burn. The tax on Wealth. The preparations for the tech war. The hoarding of minerals and blood, the mine shafts. The moles in Taiwan. Fan Bing Bing throws up honey and circles paper plane crashes. She has inflamed, scatterbrain, paper-fuselage bitch dreams. SHE knows. Fan Bing Bing knows. It is written in her eyes. She's told of investments, bitch dance hoaxes, population control, kindergarten stabbing sprees, contaminated milk products and family planning. It is all glowered, compendious in her deep eyes, her eyes black and slick as oil.

Cupping her hands around her mouth, she shouts, "Return. Return to Bing Bing! Arise! Make your presence known!!!!"

Xiao Gege crawls up from out of the drain of a squat toilet. He emerges rambling, confesses to enjoying diarrhea. And practicing sodomy with his sister. But never full-on sex. Everyone on Weibo knows he lives in the cheapest real estate in Shanghai. In a dookie booth. In a public bathroom. Next to the septic tank.

Xiao Gege wears women's *hanfu* and dyes his hair neon green. Everyone on Weibo knows his sister lets him out, like a geek in a freakshow, so he can perform his bitch dance. And only on Tuesdays does he release and chase after one or two

of Bing Bing's wild boars. Xiao Gege climbing façades of commercial buildings, running on all fours through Pudong in reckless pursuit.

"Bitch clans of the future. Tarot cards and face licks. Bitches handcuffed on the news. Call center bitch gangs at the Wuhan Institute of Virology!"

Bing Bing gasps. Her brother's unpatriotic, unharmonious words stealing through her with the force of an accusation.

Xiao Gege screams gibberish at the bathroom floor. It's smeared with shit. He'd been reaching into toilets and writing Xi Jinping Thought in feces again. Everyone on Weibo knows.

"Smile, remember the kneeling bitches," shrieks Xiao Gege, blood rising to his face. He then hums, slaps and drums the national anthem on his sister's butt.

Conjoined twin doctors, in a wide white lab coat, ride into the bathroom on a wild boar. The conjoined twin doctors smoking cigarettes and demanding a blowjob and a truth slap by Bing Bing. Bing Bing happily obliges, diamonds glinting in her eyes.

"The hacked cameras. The hacked cameras! 7-year bitch! A jokey joke! Just a jokey joke on a blog!" Xiao Gege guffaws.

"Reeducation," retorts Bing Bing, nonchalant, as she drops to her knees, unzips each conjoined twin's slacks, fishes out their identical hard, hook-shaped penises.

Xiao Gege, the geek runs circles around us. The geek giggling while watching his sister suck off, gulp, swallow each doctor's cum. Bing Bing slurps, smiles and wipes her mouth with the back of her hand after each load.

Then Bing Bing lifts up from her knees and open-hand smacks both twins in the forehead, shapeshifting the doctors' conjoined body into a small camera, about the size of a gecko lizard.

Bing Bing crouches, scoops up the camera, rises and inspects it. Wrinkles her nose. Throws the cam to the bathroom floor. Stomps on it as if it were a bug. All this with her tiny barefoot.

“Smashing the camera is ending its lies,” shrieks Xiao Gege, the geek jumping like a caged monkey.

Laughing, Bing Bing collects the camera’s pieces, tosses them into a squat toilet. Then her left arm spins like a helicopter propellor, and she claws at her brother’s forehead, carves “清楚.” Then her brother bitch dances, seemingly entranced by his wound, his blood’s warmth.

“The opacity of the system is intentional,” declares Bing Bing as she kneels before me.

NIGHT OUT IN WUHAN

—

It was five of us. Expat English teachers from a high school on the outskirts of Wuhan.

Our school being in a remote location, we were getting stir-crazy and needed a shot of bright lights, big city nightlife.

We met up around 8 in the evening outside our school's front gate and piled into a beat-up gray Renault van; a "chicken van" as it's often dubbed in China Expat nomenclature.

The chicken van made regular runs from our school to the Wuhan city center and was rickety and squeaked, creaked, bumped and thumped along as our driver, a middle-aged local, with minimal teeth and a scraggly flattop, grunted, growled and honked at everything moving as we sped by abandoned Soviet style apartment blocks, vacant factories, and an active chemical plant, its storage tanks glowing gold; its smokestacks spewing steady streams of milky exhaust into the tar of night.

The traffic flow, chaotic beeping, vehicular madness multiplied like swarms of bees and hornets as we neared the neon night of the city center.

Hard cyberpunk blasted from the van's distorted dashboard speakers, and during the journey we debated prurient topics, like who you'd rather fuck: a morbidly obese fempat or a smoking hot, post-op Thai ladyboy.

(The ladyboy won, hands down.)

We cut onward into the municipality's veins, by the black river, and saw shiny skyscrapers flanked by varying architectures of iron, and cruel, rectangular, brightly lit buildings backdropped in smog.

The streets were heavily peopled. Bikes, buses, cars, walkers, vendors; a myriad of human smells, hives of activity.

Here was the commerce, life and leisure of an economic colossus, a church of capitalism, an emerging superpower…

Our Captain was a China vet, a grizzled Welshman, a muscular, crewcut, cleft-chinned former SAS.

The wild-eyed savage in his starched and creased Iron Maiden T-shirt, camouflage cargo shorts- his usual attire, despite the damp, 7 something Celsius winter weather…

The Welshman was showing off the green dragon tattoo on his upper right arm to our driver's nodding approval.

The Welshman's glaucous eyes, w/their drooping lids, crow's feet, and his sneaky wry smile and fangled set of choppers told of time, the Commonwealth and too many sweets, and the cheeky, sprite geezer spit on the street and sparked a smoke as we disembarked from the van.

Wuhan's downtown air was different, slightly sulfuric, and its temperature felt a tad warmer than that at our school's sprawling hillside campus.

"You're 62, mate?" queried Piggy, the chubby young Londoner aside the Welshman.

"Never underestimate the importance of a good night's sleep and a proper shave…" the Welshman retorted, ejecting twin chutes of smoke through the flared nostrils of his long nose and nodding us in the direction of a nearby bar.

A muck-faced beggar in grayish rags, missing both legs, crawled by us on his forearms, prostrating along the street.

He beseeched us in a local dialect none of us could understand, but linguistic barriers couldn't obfuscate his angle, and he clutched a tattered KFC coffee cup with a ratty, crudely affixed QR code for donations…

Piggy winced. Being new to China, and Asia, I could see it affected him. The only thing that affected the rest of us was olfactory. Fucker smelled like the floor of an abattoir.

"In China, the beggars are controlled by the triads. It's a racket. Probably got his legs cut off for not paying off gambling debts. And now his wife's a hooker, too, I bet. Pun intended." The Welshman observed, seemingly attempting to calm Piggy, whapping the Pigger a playful elbow to his Buddha belly.

Most China expats, after enough time in the PRC, had a similar gallows sense of humor as the Welshman…

“What, so since he’s got no legs he can’t slap on deodorant? He’s still got arms,” chimed in American Randy, nose hair Randy, the chinless, the doomsday prepper, the flat-earther, the near midget with a walrus mustache, always in Adidas tracksuits, the raging asshole who could never put down his phone.

“I doubt deodorant’s the biggest of his worries…” I assured, testily, wanting a beer already.

—

We entered the bar through the baroque, towering, 3-meter-high ovular pecan brown wood entry door and made into the mist and volume of the establishment.

The place was a behemoth square-shaped venue that had an ersatz Euro gestalt-assorted oak veneer plinths with faux marble statues of Greek gods, a celestial ceiling, off-white walls with crown moldings, caryatids and Odesa corner onlays, and an array of prismatic overhead lights in rainbow spectrums, lasers, and strobes over the proscenium in the far left of the main room where a Filipino band played.

Our crew soldiered up to the reverse L-shaped drink counter and waved over one of the bartenders, an early 20s, tall Chinese goddess in black knee-high platform boots, hip-hugger green sparkly short shorts (revealing delicious rear décolletage) and shiny silver halter top that showed off her taut midriff.

Her hair was dyed, tied into Harley Quinn pigtails, and I wondered if she was an aspiring model or at least a luxury car show girl…

We complimented Harley on her winning of the genetic lottery, and she stoically tapped at her tablet while we ordered a bevy of beers, strictly Corona, none of the local piss, and whiskey shots, Jack on the rocks.

Each of us swiped our phones to pay, and we collectively ogled Harley Qing’s shapely derriere as she slinked off…

We cut a path through the miasma of smoke, bar staff moving like missiles, rushing drink trays, and we dodged phone zombies, randomly arranged tables, and found a vacant booth in the corner, not far from a trio of pool tables.

Doomsday Randy was pointedly saying to Piggy: “It’s not that I’m homophobic! I’m simply scared of gays. Like, an irrational fear, like I go to San Francisco or Dupont Circle and I’m thinking dudes are just gonna run up and buttfuck me, you know? I start to understand how women feel, you hear me?”

We scooted into the booth, eased into the pleather. A smiley young mushroom haircut waiter in a tacky tuxedo and oversized eyeglasses, arrived with our drinks and offered us a free plate of symmetrically laid slices of dark meats and cut fruits.

I sampled a strip of the meat and found it to have a bizarre, pungent, heavy taste. Certainly not sapid.

Canadian Chad, in his black HIV sweatshirt and ripped up blue jeans, Chad the crazy long legged, lanky, gangly fuck, Chad we call the slender man, examined the meat with squinting, sapient eyes, and shrieked and gagged. Upper lip curled, prognathous jaw extended, he offered an unusual appraisal.

“Bro, that’s fucking dog! That’s fucking dog, bro! You ate dog! I know that smell from anywhere. They ate that shit in Korea. Only kimchi is…”

I couldn’t hear the last of his words because the music was too loud, but I could easily detect his distaste, and he made fake puking gestures and burst into sardonic fits of laughter, pointing and snapping smartphone photos of my snarled mien.

“Can’t imagine how much melamine is in that dogmeat. Your kidneys are fucked. You won’t have them harvested, probably, so that’s a win…” Randy conjectured, snarling and yelling over the table, before he grabbed a slice of purple dragon fruit and began chewing it with his mouth open.

“Yerr… Only live once. Fuck Cujo,” I yelled back, and guzzled my Jack on the rocks to ablute my mouth of the taste and guilt.

Piggy was sweating, staring, his mouth agape, the pudgy punter practically mesmerized by the skimpy bikini dancer, a light-skin lovely with the big bulging Fan Bing Bing eyes of a green tea bitch.

The vixen worked the pole on a birdcage-like podium opposite the bar, gyrating, thrusting her feminine geometry to the hum, bumps of the beat. Her lithe little body shaking in hypnotizingly lusty motions; her lissome movements full of gymnastic aerial V leg splits and bad bitch twerks.

“Welcome to Communism!” Chad the Slender barked at Piggy, slapping on the Pigster’s back in a congratulatory gusto.

“Fuck Communism!” Welshman bellowed, raising his shot glass and we clinked cheers and guzzled what I hoped to be genuine whiskey. It was genuinely smoky, peaty, if nothing else, and rushed into my bloodstream with rapidity…

三

Aside from the dancer, the bar was pretty pathetic, I gathered, scouting around. Having been in Shanghai before and partied in bitching bars and clubs, this place was a joke. Felt like a simulacrum. There were hardly any ladies, other than a few scantily clad skeezers, sitting suspiciously alone at the bar.

The Welshman, noticing me checking them out, leaned over and whisper-screamed into my ear over the Filipinos’ blaring, shitty acoustic rendition of Taylor Swift’s “Bad Blood…”

“See that one over there, in the red? Those fishnets, the rack, the makeup like a geisha? My buddy working in town, he picked her up, sent me a photo. 1000 RMB for the night. Said she was a screamer. Called her Moaning Lisa…”

“Said she was cock-eyed, though, so he fucked her doggystyle.”

“Probably why she’s wearing those shades.”

“Strabismus.”

“Whatever…”

“If all else fails, we head to a massage place. Get wanked off, have a dip in the jacuzzi. Not a bad way to finish the evening, I reckon,” the Welshman affirmed, chair-danced and sparked another smoke…

Our mission was twofold: We'd come for fun. And for cunt.

Looking around, though, there wasn't much pussy to be found, at least of the free will variety. Very few debutantes here…

The bar was hazy thick in clumps of cigarette smoke and largely populated by small groups of local dudes drinking 3% alcohol beer, cradling their phones; many playing a drinking game that involved shaking a cup full of dice.

"All right, lads, let's find fanny!" hollered the Welshman at the top of his lungs. He then guzzled the remainder of his beer, and we split into two squads, a team of two and a team of three.

The Welshman slid out of the booth, rose up and continued: "Don't let any of the local blokes cajole you into drinking too many. It gives them face, like, 'Hey, I have a white friend!'

"Have a quick shot or two, on them, and then break out. But don't be daft and do a Wendell Brown."

Deploying, weaving about the floor, the Welshman and I happened upon a table of non-hooker looking lovelies in short skirts. We locked onto our targets and approached.

They were probably half our age and would never talk to us in Britain or America-unless we were rich. But here, in Asia, we had a fighting chance, asserted the Welshman, saying how girls like that in the UK wouldn't even spit on him.

"I'd lick up the water from off the floor of her shower." I was saying as we neared the pussy, my face twitching with lust.

I'd instantly been enamored by the pussy at 11 o'clock, the shoulder length hair brunette, with the resting bitch face and those hyperborean cheekbones; the gorgeous maiden, coyly crossing her shapely satin pantyhose wrapped legs, staring down at her phone, twirling her wavy hair with her fingers.

Fuck, she looked like a total bitch, which made me want her even more, and I wondered what color panties she might be wearing up under that super-skanky microscopic skirt…

But, closing in, a duo of chunky lizard-face local dudes cut off our path, smiling and patting us on the back, offering us shots, likely employing a common Asian continent cock-blocking tactic.

We reluctantly accepted, following their popped-up polo shirt collars to an adjacent table, wanting not to have a Wendell Brown.

After a shot, and pretending we didn't speak Chinese, and them speaking minimal English, we shook their hands, politely stepped off, and disappeared into the bar's stratosphere of smoke and were disappointed to find the pussy had vanished.

Even worse was that a pair of local police floated forth, menacingly, like ghouls, in front of us.

四

One of the cops was pointing his smartphone, taking pictures of us. The other greeted us in English.

"We must see your passports, please," the English speaker, the younger, taller of the pair spoke, mechanically, in a British-inflected Chinese accent.

The older, shorter copper, the one wielding the phone, examined our passports, visa pages, and snapped smartphone pics of them with splenetic fervor.

We had valid passports, visas, so it wasn't an issue. However, what happened next was unexpected, certainly at this bar.

The English-speaking cop, produced two small urine specimen cups from his coat pocket, handed them to us.

"Please provide urine samples. We check for illegal contraband," said the young cop, in a coldly formal cadence.

Being a tad buzzed, I reached for my fly, was about to whip out my dick and piss right there. But the cops winced, and the English speaker waved me off, forming an X with his arms, and pleaded: "No! No! No! We take you to WC!"

In the bathroom, Piggy, Randy and Chad were already there, looking something between pissed off and confused.

Drug tests at expat bars are common these days, in Xi Jinping's China, but they aren't too frequent in predominantly Chinese bars...

Chad was stuttering, trying Fabian tactics, something about a kidney issue, his blue eyes getting watery.

But his protesting was otiose. The coppers were stolid, unwavering, and ushered us one at a time into a stall and watched us each stand over a shit-splattered squat toilet and piss into their cups of truth.

"Please provide…" politely requested the younger copper, guiding me into the dookie booth, and when I broke out my little brother, he stared straight at it, smiled licentiously as my silver piss filled the cup.

A gaggle of other cops showed up soon after, all of them donning facemasks...

One of the newcomer cops, wearing blue latex gloves, disappeared with our warm, freshly bubbling piss while the English-speaking cop made small talk with us, mostly about basketball, then about Kobe, and who we blamed for the helicopter crash.

A few minutes later we were released. All of us, except Canadian Chad, the slender man, who was asked to "come to station."

We didn't ask why.

Leaving the WC, I saw the educator, towering above the police, cowering like a wounded giraffe, breaking into tears as the coppers encircled him.

The vibe at the bar completely killed, we decided to boogie, and head to the massage parlor early.

五

The spa was a quick five-minute walk away, and on the way there, we spotted an apartment building, its residents emptying, panicked, many in pajamas, piling into cars out front, tires screeching as they tore off hastily.

“Might be another jumper.”

“Or a building fire.”

“Another maid with a flamethrower, trying to juice the insurance cash to pay off her gambling debts.” Randy chimed in, rambling.

Randy’d taken a fancy to the maid in Hangzhou, had written her in jail, tried to visit her before she was executed via firing squad...

Next to the spa was a dead body, a migrant worker, from the looks of him. You’d see that in the city center, here and there. Dead bodies lying around before they eventually got scooped up.

An aerial drone buzzed overhead, right by us, speakers on it screaming something in Chinese, but it flew too fast and was too garbled to comprehend...

The spa had Grecian pillars in the doorway and flashing red lights, floral patterns on the awning, and the signage above had the spa’s regal name, emblem. A short red-carpet was unfurled on the sidewalk, leading inside, like a hairy tongue.

I’d been there once or twice. It was a colossal place, with a locker room, showers, a sauna, steam room, jacuzzi and small swimming pool on the first floor; the second floor a cavernous lounge area with puffy, comfy leather kick-back chairs, each having its own wraparound TV, plus a decent buffet restaurant, and a third floor filled with private massage rooms, VIP suites.

Many travelers to Wuhan stay the night there, instead of a hotel…

We entered the lobby. The floors were beige, fake marble, and a Frenchy style crystal chandelier dangled from the ceiling; red ribbons hung all over the walls, and a 3-meter-high, 2-meter-wide fish tank with various varieties of goldfish swimming about was situated near the entryway.

A poster with a list of services and prices hung above the sales counter, where we were greeted by a buxom, nubile attendant in a resplendent red flowing evening dress, who booked us in and scanned our Alipay payments with a vulpine smile.

Piggy, Welsh, Randy were escorted to the elevator, up to the sauna by a leggy raven-haired beauty in a tight-fitting gold one-piece miniskirt bearing the spa's escutcheon, and Piggy, right behind her, stared directly at her tight ass, slobbering and following it to the elevator like a syzygy.

Another golden one-piece miniskirt beauty, even hotter, this one practically all leg, led me, by myself, to another room, down a separate corridor, on the ground floor...

Legs asked me, in English, if I was a Jew.

"No, I'm Italian-American, but people sometimes think I'm Jewish because of my big nose. My ancestors are from Italy, Milan, came to America years ago."

"I like Jew," she said, chuckling, "so clever. Too bad you not Jew."

"Anyone can convert, I guess. Even you. You could be a Jew. A Chinese Jew. You'd be set on Christmas," I told her, but my joke flew over her pretty head, and her temperament cooled.

She brought me to a room that was like a hotel suite, waved me in and promptly disappeared. The room was spacious, with fancy light fixtures and had a king size bed, 55-inch flat screen TV mounted to the wall and a small fridge. The ceiling and walls were all mirrors.

A minute later another leggy, identical gold miniskirt gal stepped in. This one not half as pretty. Her head was abnormally large, and she had tiny opal eyes shaped like bent crescent moons.

However, her hourglass figure, her lower body, in particular – her hips, thighs and round ass- were most certainly enticing. Her nose and chest were both rather flat, though.

She spoke perfect English and told me her name was God.

"Would you like to sleep with me? 900 RMB," God cooed, running her hands over her runway chest, working down to her ischium, cupping her childbearing hips and swaying slightly.

I'd rarely paid for sex and wasn't going to pay her.

"No, that's okay. I just want a massage, nothing more."

God's face contorted, first in surprise, then something that appeared hurt, then irate.

"You don't think I'm beautiful?" she sniffed and coughed and crossed her arms, appearing as though she'd let loose a runnel of teary waterworks.

"No, you're beautiful. Seriously, you're great. It's not you. It's me. I only came for a massage. You're very pretty, you really are." I pleaded to her, trying to lift her spirits.

For a second I felt bad about not paying her, genuinely bad about it, but then I wondered why I honestly felt bad about not wanting to have sex with this prostitute, this "chicken woman," this slapper…

God stomped off with an expression that was something between hurt and confused. Perhaps I was the first foreigner not to hire her "services…"

The imbibing I'd done at the bar suddenly kicked up a notch, the floor feeling uneven.

A handsome young Chinese man with a shaven head suddenly appeared like he'd walked through the wall.

Heavily tattooed, and a meathead, I worried he'd come to rough me up for hurting the hooker's feelings, but he was chill and friendly and led me up to the sauna, and we chatted in Chinese about basketball.

"Kobe, numba wan!" he repeatedly exclaimed, in English, coughing and spitting on the floor as we walked down a tessellated hallway, and he showed me into the lungs of the locker room.

The locker room was humid and hot as an oven; floors were moist and hard. Beads of sweat trickled down my lower back, and I peeled off my Boy jacket, was handed a key attached to a stretchy red plastic wristband…

六

I undressed, put my clothes in the locker, slapped on slippers and had a quick shower. Steamy water cascading over me, “Bitches Ain’t Shit” by YG started playing in my mind and I sung the words loudly.

I stepped out of the shower, wrapped a towel over my waist, bumbling and stumbling in a dipsomaniacal duck-walk by the jacuzzi bath where I spotted Piggy and Welshman.

“What up, bloods?!” I yelled at them.

Neither replied, and they looked at me like they’d eaten a lemon.

I’m not black and neither are they, which is why I found it fun to call these vampire pale, crumpet eating, tea sipping, stiff-upper lip Brit fucks hip-hop slang like “bloods.”

Walking past them, I heard Welsh mutter something about, “septic…”

Everywhere, in the showers, stepping in and out of the sauna, pool, steam room, were Chinese men in vapors, birthday suits. Unkempt, hairy dicks, nuts wiggling and dangling, bare asses hanging out…

Most of them were like walking chimneys, voraciously smoking cigarettes, which, given their nudity, I couldn’t help but wonder where they kept the cancer sticks and how they managed to light them; most were coughing, crepitating loudly as they gathered about the premises, hacking up massive phlegm flams, spitting on the vanilla tiled floors.

I was handed the standard spa uniform (pajama-like shorts and a shirt) by a haggardly middle-aged male spa attendant, the guy’s voice sounding like he’d swallowed a chainsaw. I slipped out of my towel, into my duds, and noticed Chainsaw Voice peter-gazing.

Chainsaw Voice chuckled and quipped to another spa worker, a scowling, slightly older guy, saying something about how “just Africans are bigger…”

I wandered into the dimly lit lounge area and was met by another obligatory, young leggy lady attendant, standing dutifully, radiating in the caramel patina; this babe a busty nymphet crowned by a glittering bluish black, blond-highlighted curly mane that flowed like moonlit river currents to her slim waist.

I gawked at her décolletage on full display, sympathizing with her breasts' struggle, their fighting the seam of her xanadu blouse.

Tits asked if I'd like an oil massage.

It was tough to refuse, her inviting me and all.

"From you?" I asked her, and she coyly smiled, demurred and led me by my lonesome into an elevator which rocketed me to the third floor.

The elevator's platinum doors whooshed and slid open to the image of a marble-skinned honey, her ceraceous, heavily whore-painted face showing strains of senescence.

Despite a somewhat high odometer, she was still sparkling in short-short amaranth shorts, and matching tank-top emblazoned with the spa's rose-wrapped emblem.

MILF stood tall in super-high, silver heels and received me with a necromantic smile revealing rotten teeth, and I quickly noticed that her breath smelled like an unflushed toilet.

She checked the number on my wristband, and led me wordlessly, perfunctorily, her heels clicking and clacking into the trachea of the massage maze.

The hallways looked like Rothko paintings and were curvilinear bronchi, branches of rooms, each w/faux mahogany door, each door having I-shaped small windows, many of them occluded by white towels, and nearly every room alive with TV sounds, stertorous breathing and coughs.

I was led into a dimly lit unoccupied room. It had hotel style accoutrements- a small bed with only a vanilla-colored top sheet, and a plastic red rose laid on its singular pillow.

A small bathroom was cut into the room's lower left lobe, and a 45' flatscreen TV mounted to the umber wall faced the bed; under the TV was a creamy white minifridge.

An impressionist style oil painting of red roses hung in the right main of the room, atop twin carved wooden chairs and low table with a dirty ashtray. The room stank strongly of mosquito coil incense and cigarettes…

七

Manky Mouth MILF flicked on the TV and clanked off and out and another beauty entered the room, a younger, late 20ish, shorter girly; plumper, darker yellow skinned, the type many Asian dudes wouldn't like- too much meat on the bones, I'd gander.

But for me, as a lecherous laowai, she was a keeper. Gorgeous. Shorty's thick luscious, generous thighs and bigger than average Chinese bosom protruded proudly in her skintight one-piece black mini.

Her ebony eyes were huge, had arched serifs, and something like a golden aureole shone, lambently, atop her raven mane as she entered the doorway.

She was robotic at first, greeting me in formalities as she walked in, but seeing I was a foreigner, she was taken aback, literally stepping backwards, frozen for a second in shock, asking me in Chinese if I could speak Chinese, saying that she didn't speak English.

"Sure," I told her in Mandarin.

Relieved, she cracked a smile, and told me how she didn't think any foreigners spoke Chinese.

"Why? Because we're too stupid?" I inquired, mischievously twitching my eyebrows and sniggling.

"Yup, something like that. Chinese is very complicated. Even I don't speak it well," she exclaimed, sniggling back, and I admired her probity.

She ordered me to disrobe, completely, and flip over onto my stomach, and I immediately complied with her commands.

I asked her name, and she said she only had a number.

"8…"

8 slipped out of her black/pink stilettos, revealing her true height, and she climbed onto the bed, started working me over, rubbing my back in semicircular, palpating patterns.

Her touch was divine. Her fingers conducting electricity, her energy coursing, pulsating, afferently, washing over me like tides, illuminating me, and then setting my soul into an ocean of peace.

Her voice, too, was like music; her girly, baby-doll timbre and southern Chinese accent, totally lacking the sibilants, was so fucking cute.

We chitter-chattered, made sequacious small talk about the usual things Chinese wanna know, American food, (did we eat hamburgers for breakfast), how much money I made, (are we all rich like on TV), if I had a gun (yes, in America, everyone has a gun and someone shoots at you anytime you open the door or go outside so you better have a gun and shoot back, I jokingly assured her, and she slapped my shoulder for my cheek…)

Her touch was not only angelic, but it was strong, powered by her 55 KG bodyweight, and she hit every pressure point in my back, dug into my thoracolumbar fascia like the pro she was.

Drifting southward, she cupped and squeezed my gluteus maximus, nurturing it.

But then, 8 whispered in my ear for me to lift up to my knees and assume a bent over, doggystyle sort of position, which she demonstrated next to me on the bed, my mouth watering as she pointed her big, circular, meaty globes towards the ceiling.

“Why?” I asked, thinking if anything I’d want her bending over like that.

And 8 demonstrated why, scooting up next to me, and slipping a surprise finger up into my ass.

“Ack!” I screamed and slapped her hand away. I hadn’t come for a rectal exam.

She laughed like my protestation was a risible remark.

“It’s good for the health, me touching up there,” 8 asserted, her expression turning sour. “Come on, let me do it!” she insisted, her face getting pouty.

I guessed she enjoyed fingering dudes up the ass, and I guessed many dudes were into that finger in the butt shit. But I wasn't.

Nothing against it, but, for me, I prefer putting things up others' asses.

(Only things I like around, entering my ass are bum guns and tongues. I must admit to enjoying the rimming of my asshole via water or a spongy warm lick...)

I flipped over, onto my back, and gazing down her shirt, at her twin peaks, I sprouted a stiffy.

"They're big…" I muttered, mesmerized by her jiggly, pendulous cleavage.

"Wow, you're big too! Foreigners really are larger…" she marveled, peering down at my tall, chubby, pulsating white cock that'd sprung up accusingly at her face.

I pointed down at her monkey and asked her if I could fuck her. She shook her head. I asked her if she'd suck my dick. She shook her head harder, made an X motion with her arms and said in English: "NO, NO, NO!"

Disappointed, dispirited, I shrugged and told her to resume the massage. The night was turning out to be shit.

However, she lifted my mood by squirting rose hip oil into her right hand, and reaching down, grabbing hold of my johnson, and gently jerking, choking and pumping it.

With her free hand she tenderly touched over my balls and then caressed and tickled numbers from my pelvis, to my stomach, north to my pecs; 8 gracefully running her jagged acrylic nails over my skin, softly, so softly; playfully teasing my nipples, and the tension, sensation of her delicate touch gave me gooseflesh.

Gripping my dick, her hot, greasy hand felt like it was made of feathers. It gliding along my manhood made me tremble, turning my heartbeat tachycardiac.

What jerkoff technique she had… It was impeccable, her spiral motions, the pressure of her grip, her teasing the top of my shaft; it was masterful.

Who better to receive a hand job from than a masseuse?

Instinctively I ran my left hand over her creamy yellow thighs, which were smooth and velvety. I traced my hand up and felt on her bullet-shaped tits, pushed and

liberated them carefully from her pink pushup bra, freeing them out and over her neckline, and heard her sigh when they escaped into the air.

I sat up and took hold of her pointy, supple tits, sucking, nibbling and licking on 8's silky golden flesh, tasting a tinge of her salty sweat mixed with a rosy, piquant perfume, or maybe bodywash, and she moaned and whispered "feels good" into my ear as I suckled.

While squeezing on, tonguing her tits, I angled a free hand downwards, went up her skirt, reached under the cotton sheath of her panties and stuck my index finger through the slippery silk folds of her pussy, up into her piping-hot, teeny tiny tight pussyhole.

Amazing how small it was. The snuggest, tightest I'd ever felt. I could only imagine how it would've been, how it would've stretched on my big white dick… It's true what's said about Oriental pussy being the world's best…

8 squirmed, squealed, and swatted my hand away. I relented and reclined, lay back into the bed. I figured we were even. Touché.

Just feeling her snug snatch, her sizzling bitch heat, her luscious love tunnel, fucking blasted me into overdrive.

I was hugged in a heavy blanket of warmth and happily tingled all over, and the speed, voracity of her pumping on my cock reached a furious crescendo.

My toes curled, and I clutched 8 tightly, braced myself for the inevitable.

"Waaaaaaaaaa!" I gurgled and gasped, neck veins popping, and my dick let loose, spit comets of cum, chemtrails, ropes of splooge, blasting an enfilade, spraying, soaking and painting her black hip-hugging dress in jizzy Jackson Pollock pearly white streaks…

"Oh my god!" she muttered, milking my member diligently, caringly, giving it emphatic finishing tugs, draining it, pulling it a couple more times for good measure, even after I'd finished shooting.

"You jerk!" she hissed in faux odium, and she slapped me on the chest, playfully, knowing she'd have laundry to do.

“Your liquid is hot…” she observed, wiping me and then herself down afterwards with a hand towel, her juicy titties dangling and bobbing about as she tidied up.

8 raised a white bath towel over me, fixed her dress and went to the bathroom to wash her hands, and then quickly left the room to change.

I turned my attention to the TV, watching a replay of a pathetically lopsided NBA basketball game full of lackluster defense and gratuitous 3-pointers. For a second it looked like the crowd was full of corpses…

The news ticker read: “Flying Tigers versus Euthenics”

Panning around the room, I noticed a few fissures- long, vein-like cracks running the length of the wall. Fucking prefabs…

When 8 came back, she’d changed into a looser fitting raspberry-colored dress and was wearing a teal surgical mask.

She sat behind me on the bed, cross-legged, cradled my head in her lap and massaged my temples and lightly scratched my scalp.

It was harder to understand her muffled speech, but I comprehended most of it, and we talked about food. I told her I liked to eat exotic Asian delicacies, like scorpions and tarantulas.

She mentioned a market that sold snakes, foxes, and civets, bats and various colorful critters.

Being new to Wuhan, I’d yet to go, but wanted to, and I asked her if she’d take me. To my surprise, she said “yes,” in English, flung out her phone and added me to her WeChat.

A phone on the wall, near the door, rang and beeped, signifying our time was up, and I slapped her fleshy ass as she rose.

8 laughed, blew me a mock kiss, told me to message her on WeChat, and hurried out of the room.

I held my index finger under my nose, the one that’d penetrated her, and sniffed it, deeply, joyously, breathing in its tangy smell, then licked off its pungent juice… Delicious…

Sighing loudly, gathering myself, and stretching out like a starfish on the mattress, I felt magnificent after such a special massage.

“Fucking hell, I never understood strictures against ‘full-release’ massages… A penis or pussy is simply a body part… What makes it so different from a finger, hand, foot or neck, really?” I mumbled, my words touching air.

八

On the TV was a news report of a virus at the market we’d just spoken about. But the TV said it was under control, those affected were in hospital.

Looking at the newscaster, a late 20s, 30ish short-haired primp and proper lady with a Beijing accent, I wondered if she was human.

After a quick shower in the bathroom, I slipped back into my spa wear…

Leaving the room, I spotted a middle-aged man slumped over, passed out in the hallway, a puddle of indeterminate liquid next to him.

I stepped over him, avoiding the liquid as best I could.

Around the mouth of the elevators, the aging beauty from before was nowhere to be seen, and I elevatored down to the lounge area.

Most of the punters in the lounge were passed out, motionless, a few were coughing up a storm.

Piggy was the first of our crew I spotted. He sat languorously, looking ashamed and was being talked to by a male attendee from the spa, himself in a golden lounge shirt and shorts with the spa’s insignia emblazoned over the chest and leg pockets.

“You have two. Pay double. Two. Two. Double the price…” said the attendee, politely, but firmly. His servile smile was foreboding.

Piggy wasn’t responding, was only shrugging his shoulders, staring at the floor, guiltily, and his sweaty, sebaceous face had him looking like he wanted to click his heels and be back in London.

The attendee stalked off; rage clearly visible in the angles of his obsidian eyes.

I sat down next to Piggy, asked what's what.

Piggy grunted. His eyebrows were like diaresis, and he leaned over, said to me quietly, voice trembling:

"Ah, mate, I was being massaged by this bird, and another bird comes in, also fit. I couldn't resist. They both… gave me an unforgettable massage. But we've not been paid yet, so my Alipay is low. Didn't stop to think they charge double. I reckon I wasn't in the right frame of mind to bargain."

I saw across the room, and the aforementioned attendee, a lithe young man, was puffing a cigarette intently, and looking our direction, ominously. With his crewcut and bent teeth, he had a countenance stinking of anger.

He was on his phone, yelling into it, glaring directly at us. Another couple of young male staff, these two taller, bigger, soon joined him; the newcomers in plain street clothes; one of them with a weirdly sloped head.

Knowing this wouldn't end well, I played the plenipotentiary, and smiled, waved stink eyes over, swiping my phone at him.

His countenance instantly shifted from frown to polite smile, and he hurried over, by himself, his raptorial partners in the corner looking on, baring their fangs…

I told him Piggy was drunk, didn't know what was what, and that I'd pay his tab, and apologized for any misunderstandings. "No problem, no problem," he assured me, scanning my QR code, grinning and shaking my hand.

He sauntered back over to his compadres, both of whom were now wearing facemasks, and waved them off and himself disappeared into the smoky darkness.

On the TV Piggy and I watched a sick man on a stretcher being carried by paramedics in hazmat suits, into a waiting ambulance. A guy a few seats away broke into a coughing fit. His mouth was frothing spumes of blood, nacreous mist…

"Might be a good time to bounce…" I said to Piggy, who shook his head, ebulliently, in agreement.

I texted Randy, not sure if he'd respond. But he did. Instantaneously. Like an arrow from a bow.

He replied with a message about how he was gone. And that soon there'd be diseased corpses shot from missile launchers, atop concentration camp hospitals, from Wuhan, Hubei into Japan and Vietnam.

"It's weaponized. A purge. Population control. Cull the elders, spur the birthrate, liberate Taiwan, a masterplan from the mandate of heaven. You know the CCP killed Kobe… Next is Lebron… You won't see Winnie anywhere for a week. Guaranteed… I'm ghost…"

Randy would often rage about random conspiracy theories, get too sloshed, and generally be a disputatious motherfucker, so I didn't put much currency in his message. Crazy bastard might be sleeping on the street again. Ah well.

I was about to text the Welshman, but he stumbled over, reeking of baijiu.

"Life is fug. Fugacious. Fucking fugacious," Welsh was coughing himself now, snot trickling from his nose.

He held a white tissue; on it were what appeared to be rosebuds drawn in blood.

"What's your gambit, mate?" he slurred, tilting his head, standing over me, humming a Monty Python tune.

"I'm thinking we bounce. Look at the dude over there." I pointed at the guy I'd seen coughing blood, but he was gone.

"Let's go, fellas." I stood up and led the Brits to the lockers, where we dressed. The usual locker room attendants were nowhere to be seen, so we showed ourselves to the throat of the hallway, elevatored to the ground floor, which was also vacant.

We made our way out into the icy air of the night, and on the street, we spotted a few elderly men, shabbily dressed, splayed out on the sidewalks, motionless.

A lady in a nearby apartment building threw a hissing cat from her second story window. Miraculously, the animal landed on its feet, was unscathed, and took off running.

A fleet of ambulances screamed by, followed by a PLA tank. A helicopter roared above.

I booked a Didi, which showed up after only a couple minutes.

The car was a coal black hearse, its windows darkly tinted.

Climbing into the mothering heat of the hearse, we heard Eminem's "Stan" playing on garbled speakers, and the driver, a hook-nosed Uyghur in a skull cap and burnoose, silently nodded hello.

I got another text from Doomsday Randy:

"It's SARS, newly modified. 5G, karma from the concentration camps, where it's been tested... Eschatology 101… The infiltration… GET OUT."

The Uyghur Didi driver reached over the driver's seat and passed a black garbage bag to us.

I opened it and found a pile of 3M facemasks.

He again nodded to us, silently, in the rearview mirror.

His face in a pool of dark light, he gunned the engine.

PERDITION IN BANGKOK

1

The apartment had a grotesque, silent, and almost paranormal presence. As if thousands of glaring eyes were hidden in its walls. This was the premonition that found me upon my initial visit…

Moreover, the apartment's air had a peculiar scent, a certain sterile acidity. Similar to that of a cleaning fluid. And there was an unusual and occasional heaviness to the air, too, a passing pressure, much like the cabin of a descending aircraft.

However, despite my off-putting first impressions, the apartment's pros outweighed its cons. The place was in a prime location, smackdab downtown, only a short walk to a subway station. In addition, it was sprawling, bright, and on an upper floor of a sleek, glass-plated tower. A building that looked sort of like a robot.

But most importantly, it was cheap. Very cheap. The unctuous leasing agent averring that the bargain price was because of “COVIT” (as he pronounced it: koh-veet).

So I pounced on it, without hesitation. Scoring a place this big, in downtown Bangkok, a furnished apartment with floor-length windows and panoramic views of the “Big Mango” was having me feel as if I won the lotto. Then I remembered the alms I gave to that young muscular monk at Wat Benchamabophit, “The Marble Temple,” last year, and I supposed my altruism must be paying its dividends.

(That monk was shredded, too, his body cabled with rippling muscles. He appeared more like a pro kickboxer than a monk. Perhaps he was a Thai kickboxer, partaking in a monastic year, expiating his sins, collecting and distributing karma…)

Note to self: Exercise more and practice more Buddhism.

Upon moving in, the cleaning fluid smells, declivity, and the ethereal presence remained but dissipated. And I’d been fascinated by the sound I’d been hearing. A sound I’d not heard in ages. The sound of silence.

I’d been delighted, enamored with the apartment’s silence. Unlike my last place, on the third floor of a five-storey building, here, in my new apartment, there were no hawkers outside my window, no-one pushing creaky carts or cajoling or honking squeaky little horns, and the ambient traffic sounds were merely a distant hum.

However, as is typical in Thailand, the silence wouldn’t last long.

Noises came forth. Noises crawling like hermit crabs from their shells; noises grinding like teeth in the night. The noises digging up skeletons. The noises casting spells and moving minutes. Noises buttfucking vampires. Noises birthing phantasms. Phantasms… falling out like popcorn… Phantasms… those chattering dark creatures of thought somewhere between the somnambulist and psychosomatic.

It was in this way that an onset of erethism ensued and thus began my descent into perdition.

The perdition began immediately after I'd moved in. An infernal sleeplessness washed in, washed over me, in a nocturnal tide. I'd lie awake at night and sense… something. Something like an urge. An urge, compelling me, seizing me. It was an uncomfortable feeling, like I had an unfinished task, and it was nagging me, the feeling, but I didn't know exactly what I had to do, which in turn, bothered me even more.

The urge would often be accompanied by nausea, and a tightening of the chest, followed by columns of tiny floaters in vertical, horizontal formations. The floaters fluttering by, caking my line of sight, the floaters like little fluorescent bottle caps, flashing neon dots as bright as Bangkok's cyberpunk skyline.

Lying in bed, I'd know the floaters and not know them. I'd experience the urge and disavow it, attempt to ignore it. But I couldn't. There'd be a tug at my guts, as if a ghostly hand were digging down my throat. I'd feel as if I wanted to vomit. But I couldn't. I could only muster a pathetic hiss and a dry heave. I longed to vomit. Longed for a pumping of the guts. The longing, it came and went, then vanished. It was transitory as a flock of birds.

After a week in the new apartment, the nagging, the paranormal urges worsened to an execrable degree, and I began not being able to sleep. At all.

Day and night were becoming increasingly irrelevant. Whether the orb of the sun, or projected shadows, neither mattered. I was just stuck. I was contemplating visiting a fortune teller. I was wondering if I was shapeshifting into a water monitor lizard, because I was imagining myself as a water monitor lizard. I was seeing myself swimming in canals and crawling up sticky walls.

It was enraging. Whenever I'd try to sleep, I couldn't. Then I'd hoist my head and check the clock. 4:35 a.m. It was always 4:35 a.m.

2

It was 4:35 a.m. I decided that since I couldn't sleep anyway, I'd go stand on the balcony, stare at the ether. In the inky sky, I could see whirling patterns passing by, patterns passing into a sidereal distance; vivacious, complex patterns, patterns of

colored gemstones, tropical flower banks, Scottish stained-glass windows, mogul arches and suicide doors, peacock designs. The patterns flickered and glowered brighter than animated billboards, then disappeared like groups of penguins trudging into an Antarctic blizzard.

The street below was empty, graveyard quiet, save for the gentle rumble of a passing truck or the lowkey buzz of a motorbike. I'd never seen downtown Bangkok so desolate. I recalled complaints about legions of uncouth continental Chinese tourists trashing Thailand, and COVIT seemed like their perfect closing act.

I yawned, then sucked in a steamy breath of the outside air. I'd say "fresh" air, but the air is never actually fresh in Bangkok. It always carries a faint effluvium, and often packs a powerful stink; a stink of diesel fumes, a stink of sewer smells, or that distinct smoky stink created by local farmers slashing and burning nearby rice fields.

Again, I considered shapeshifting into a water monitor lizard. I seriously began to identify as a water monitor lizard. I saw myself in scales, saw myself with green skin. I saw myself with a forked tongue, claws instead of fingers, and my blood cold as ice water…

Night still hung like a cape over the city. I stretched and yawned again, then crossed my arms and leaned forward on my balcony's railing and saw out to an abandoned building nearby. The building site, the development, was intended to be an audacious luxury condo, aimed at the continental Chinese market, but construction had been halted, and so it sat abandoned and half-built, its windows staring absently, such as the eye sockets of skulls in an ossuary.

Nowadays the abandoned luxury condo project was occupied by rats. Infested by rats. Big, ugly gray rats. I'd been seeing colonies of big ugly gray rats scurrying up the half-built building's walls. Rats running around its hollowed shell. Rats living on its ossified floors. The rats really were gargantuan too, almost the size of small dogs.

There were packs of stray cats living on my street, and I wondered if the cats could tackle, maul the rats, do whatever cats do to rats, but I wasn't so sure. The

stray cats were thin, brittle-looking, and some were tailless. And those rats were fucking monstrous.

The rats seemed to be growing larger, too, by the day. Perhaps the rats were a result of an experiment gone wrong or toxic waste, like the Teenage Ninja Mutant Turtles. Somehow I didn't see any physical confrontation between the hulking, toxic rats and the emaciated feral cats being a fair fight.

I imagined a feral cat being circled by rats, torn to shreds, the same way a hornet is swarmed and annihilated in a bee's nest. Then I wondered if the rats would die of "COVIT." Maybe that'd do them in. The rats, in an abandoned Chinese building, dying of COVIT. Sounds plausible and strangely inevitable.

I stepped back inside, into the tingly chill of manufactured air, and returned to bed. I'd been experiencing trouble striking the right balance with my new a/c system. It was always too hot or too cold. Never just right…

3

I wormed underneath the covers and pressed my head back into my stack of pillows. The pillows were soft as breasts. My bones heavy, I sank into the springs of the mattress. Tossing, turning, I was trying to position myself right. Yet sleep wouldn't find me. My mind raced until the urge came back.

Sitting up again in bed, I coughed. A dry, hacking cough. There was something in my throat. Something bubbling up from my stomach. There was something inside me. I knew it. If only I had an X-ray machine, I'd know. When will phones have X-ray apps? When will that happen? Probably not soon. We still lack the flying cars I pictured for the 2020s.

Coughing more, a body-rocking cough seized over me. Then a cold quiver. Then my body trembled, so much it was like an earthquake. I worried I might have epilepsy. Or Parkinson's. Or Lupus. Whatever the fuck Lupus is, I might have it and might be about to die.

Wait a sec, doesn't Selena Gomez have Lupus? And she isn't dead. But didn't she need a kidney transplant? What if I need a kidney transplant? Is Lupus why so

many people wake up, in a bathtub, missing a kidney? The more I contemplated Lupus, the more I became unsettled.

But I would resist the impulse to grab my phone and check WebMD about Lupus. I would resist WebMD altogether. The NHS site is better. The British are typically better at accepting death. Americans act like it's optional. A British coworker told me that. And it's generally true. Just compare WebMD to the NHS website and you'll see.

The NHS site even mentions "farting" as a side effect. Of what, I can't remember. Maybe it was Lupus. As scary as Lupus seems, I think Lupus needs a scarier name. Lupus sounds more like a Sesame Street character than a disease…

I heard an obnoxious falsetto voice in the distance. It was crooning a horrific version of the David Bowie song "I'm Afraid of Americans." It sounded worse than a failed *American Idol* audition. It sounded worse than fingernails on a chalkboard. It sounded worse than Avenged Sevenfold.

Then I smelled a strong scent of gin and lifted my head. Startled and curiously intrigued, I scanned around the room and, standing beside the TV, I saw a bald, heavyset man; he was broad of shoulders, thick in the stomach, and maybe 50 years of age. The stranger stood on stubby legs and had freakishly long arms, arms that dangled like dead animals, arms that reached below his knees.

Stranger, too, was that the stranger was naked, and looked like a white ape, with how his bushy gray body hair coalesced, carpeted his pale skin. His simian face was twisted into a taut mask of pain, but once we made eye contact, a toothless smile stretched over his lips. Then he vanished into the darkness of my bedroom, instantly, as if a TV screen were shut off, and the heavy scent of alcohol also disappeared.

Must be the insomnia, I thought. Or maybe I'm dreaming. Whatever it was, I was disturbed by the vision but threw my head back into my pillows. Tried to let the night terror pass.

I tried to count sheep. I tried to think anodyne thoughts. But I was haunted, rocked by a bolt of fear, when I closed my eyes and saw the white ape again. He

was still naked but was crucified, upside down, to the wall of a Hooters restaurant, and his chest had a surgically implanted, heart-shaped computer monitor that was broadcasting leaked video of corporations chipping human brains, corporations broadcasting commercials into the populace's dreams, corporations selling face tattoo advertising space.

I ruminated on just how much Coca-Cola would have to pay to slap a Coke logo on a customer's cheeks or forehead… I estimated face tattoo ad prices would vary by country, region.

4

I melted into my indentation. Then I farted, a particularly loud, noxious fart, and stretched my arms and experienced another jarring body tremor.

I worried, worried about the shaking. Shaking is not normal. Was it a stroke? What if… What if it was… ? I might have... How would I know? Who would know? Phones don't have body-screening apps! I could die right this second.

Anodyne thoughts! Anodyne thoughts! Be that water monitor lizard, I commanded myself. Have a lizard's skin, integument. A lizard should be stoic.

But then another thought terror seized me. What if I grew to 100-feet-tall, and were just walking around as a giant, but not hurting anyone, just yelling, "Hey, I don't know what's going on here, I don't know why I'm a giant! I come in peace!" while the army, and enraged citizens are shooting at me, trying to slay me, treating me like Godzilla. That's what I felt like, lying there in bed. I was an accidental giant.

I breathed deeply; my chest heaved and fell. Anodyne thoughts! I attempted to ponder the fresh and uplifting, like the documentaries my friend recommended about *Yo! MTV Raps!* And another about Death Row Records.

But… my mind kept churning… And I suddenly panicked. What if… I… What if I have AIDS? I'd had unprotected sexual intercourse with a trashy chick from a bar, only a couple months ago. But I read AIDS is easier to catch through anal, and I don't remember doing anal with her. But just because I don't remember it doesn't

mean it didn't happen. It was dark, and my aim might have been off. I do remember she was surprisingly tight.

SHIT! What if I have AIDS!?

Then I thought of the people I'd heard about, in Cuba, artists and street performers who were injecting themselves with needles filled with AIDS blood, in a quest to catch AIDS. "Bug Chasers," or something like that, was their appellation.

There was also a guitarist from an old heavy metal band I like, Ratt, who died of AIDS. Do rats die of AIDS? I should play Ratt at an ear-piercing volume, blast it at the rats in the abandoned Chinese building. Why do I hate the rats, anyway? They spread diseases, though, right? The bubonic plague? Maybe COVIT and AIDS both came from rats…

The rapper Eazy-E died of AIDS.

Eazy-E died from Suge Knight stabbing him with an AIDS needle, though, right? I think someone told me that. Or maybe Suge Knight shot Eazy-E with a poison dart, a poison dart full of AIDS. I could see Suge Knight, as a ninja, hiding atop a fir tree, blasting AIDS darts at Eazy-E.

And what the fuck? How come the Ratt guitarist and the boxer Tommy Morrison and Eazy-E all died of AIDS and Magic Johnson is still alive? It doesn't quite make sense. But I guess because Magic wasn't involved with Suge Knight. That must be it. I don't know if Suge killed the Ratt guitarist or the boxer, but it wouldn't surprise me. Suge Knight probably killed a long list of people. More than Sammy "The Bull", I bet…

5

A string of fuzzy green floaters slinked over my line of sight, crawling like a neon caterpillar. Then I recalled that Sammy "The Bull" has a podcast. And he's on YouTube now. Sammy "The Bull" Gravano killed 19 people. And now he has a podcast. Why do people listen to it? Why do I listen to it? For the same reason I'd watch OJ Simpson give relationship advice on Twitter.

The macabre is fascinating. People will always crane their necks at car accidents, plane crashes, Britney Spears, and reality television…

I wonder where he is, Sammy "The Bull"… What if Sammy "The Bull" Gravano were living next door? He'd fit right in, in Bangkok, another elderly expat. Sammy "The Bull", in a Bangkok whorehouse, getting sucked off right now. I could see it.

Then I remembered that I read a book about a guy who fucked hookers without condoms. But he didn't catch AIDS and was disappointed. Then he cut off one of his fingers in protest of Amazon's effect on independent bookstores and mailed the severed limb to Jeff Bezos.

These were the thoughts plaguing me. The thoughts animating me. Like why it's funny to see a fat person dancing or riding a motorcycle… And what does Elon Musk think about when he takes a shit… What does Jeff Bezos or Bill Gates think of when they shit?

I don't think much when I shit. I look at sport scores and highlights. That's probably the difference between billionaires and me. Billionaires are serious. They're probably working, thinking, inventing things, even when they're shitting.

I wonder what Sammy "The Bull" thinks of when he shits. Didn't Sammy "The Bull" catch Lupus? Isn't that why he lost all his body hair? These days, Sammy "The Bull" looks like a burn victim or a cancer kid. He's all fucked up, looks worse than Michael Rapaport. Michael Rapaport, "The Gringo Mandingo", that dude has the face of a hairless cat.

Then I wondered if Sammy "The Bull", when taking a shit, thinks about OJ Simpson…

(Then I pictured Sammy "The Bull", barefoot and in a wrestler's singlet, an old school singlet, King Kong Bundy style... Sammy "The Bull", running barefoot in Lumpini Park. Sammy "The Bull", stopping midstride, Sammy "The Bull", with his New Yawk accent, berating and cursing at an Asian Water Monitor Lizard, just assailing the creature with expletives…)

Anton Szandor LaVey wrote that Martin Luther thought up the reformation while taking a crap. I could never forget that.

People always picture Satanists as chopping up puppies, Satanists painting themselves in chicken blood and dancing naked, chanting in front of full moons. But not all Satanists are like that. I had a friend who was a Satanist, and he was an accountant. If you saw him, in his suit and cufflinks, you'd never think he was a Satanist. But he was.

6

I shifted in bed, sensed a stinging chill, a cold presence, and the hairs on the nape of my neck prickled. My eyes opened, mechanically, like automatic doors, and I saw that lying next to me lay a young Thai girl, maybe early 20ish. The girl was completely nude. She lay supine, and her protruding eyeballs were of an ungodly crimson-purple color, and her slim body, her golden skin was repaired in yantra tattoos.

The girl was sobbing and trembling. Then she screamed at the ceiling, bellowed out something in Isan dialect. Jolted aback, I jumped out of bed, and she immediately vanished.

It must be another hallucination. I can't remember the last time I slept properly. I might even be dreaming that I'm awake. Or awake and wishing I was dreaming. It's confusing, jarring, a jolt to the senses, these circadian disruptions. The whites of my walls appeared as tall as snow-capped mountains, and sudden schools of greenish floaters swam through my vision like flocks of effervescent fish.

My ears popped. Then I yawned, sucked in a batch of pensive air, and cautiously crept back into the warmth of the bed and lay atop the covers, flat on my back. I wore only my Scooby Doo boxers. I looked around, both ways, like I was about to cross the street, but I didn't see the crying Thai ghost girl. Though I could feel that noticeable chill of an invisible presence again. It was strong too. Stronger than ever. It was as if the walls were no longer snow-capped mountains, and were instead cloudy, unblinking eyes of a leviathan.

My eyes felt like peepholes, like two cameras, so I shut my eyelids. Spray-paint, street art visions cast across my psyche, animated graffiti visions of Eazy-E in a sea of flames. Eazy-E in sunspots, Eazy-E as a Greek God, Eazy-E atop Mount Everest,

collecting solar flares with his sunglasses. Eazy-E in a diadem, floating over Compton like a blimp. Eazy-E flying like Superman, Eazy-E in a spectral cast of gold.

Then I cringed, witnessed Eazy-E lassoed and jerked down from the sky, gored by a syringe-wielding Suge Knight. Suge Knight in a wolf gray, flat-brimmed Stetson hat. Suge Knight as a werewolf, Suge Knight howling at a full moon, Suge Knight's eyes full of blood as he sadistically stabbed a crouching, crying Eazy-E… I imagined Suge Knight being a violently peremptory fuck.

"Youse a penguin looking motherfucker," the Dr. Dre song sounded in my mind.

I used to memorize gangsta rap song lyrics, sing them in the shower. Gangsta rap is the most authentic form of music, the only art that is real, the only art form that is true to itself, the only art that is pure, the only art that purports to be nothing other than what it is. Gangsta rap is the most quintessentially American music in that it unashamedly, unreservedly, unapologetically celebrates the pursuit of happiness...

7

A mosquito the size of a grizzly bear could be in my room, and if it were quietly buzzing, the a/c might obscure it. So I cracked my eyes open a tad and saw nothing but the darkness. Though I wasn't convinced there weren't any prehistoric creatures living in the bowels of Bangkok's sewer system.

I flipped over, onto my stomach, and stretched into an X shape. My mind moved and I wondered if maybe karma came back to bite Suge Knight in the ass. Or shoot him in the ass. I remembered that I was in Miami Beach, right down the street from the party where Suge Knight got shot in the buttocks. Yes, oh yes, I heard the police sirens, ambulances, and commotion.

The news reports said Suge had been shot in the leg, but I knew a guy who worked at the Shore Club, and he heard the pop from the gun, and said he saw the assailant, a dude in a pink shirt, opening fire at Suge's table, and when Suge ducked down, Suge covered his head like it was a Cold War schoolkid drill. And that's when Suge took a bullet in the butt.

I'm not sure if the person who shot Suge in the ass was ever apprehended. I'd like to think it was Eazy-E's ghost. A poltergeist, hellbent on vengeance, hellbent on shooting Suge in his big fat ass. I wondered if the bullet was intended for Suge's back but trailed lower, due to bad aim. Just like a penis, whether in the bathroom, or during drunk sex, guns can be difficult to aim.

In movies, people fire guns like clicking off and on a light switch. Remember that scene from *Goodfellas* where Joe Pesci is shooting at Spider's feet? Funny as it was, in reality, everyone's ears would have been bleeding. In reality, guns are loud and heavy. Was it an amateur, shooting Suge, or a rushed shot? Not everyone shoots with the acuity of Chris Kyle.

Who shot Suge Knight in the ass? The mystery was consuming me.

It coulda been Vanilla Ice. I saw in the doc that due to a financial dispute between the two, Suge Knight strangled Vanilla Ice, then dangled Vanilla Ice, upside down, by his legs, from a high-rise hotel balcony. Suge Knight then strong-armed Vanilla Ice's publishing money, took Vanilla Ice for five million dollars! FIVE million fucking dollars! That was how Suge got the seed capital for Death Row Records.

Maybe Vanilla Ice blasted Suge Knight in the buttocks. Vanilla Ice, in a pink shirt. I could see it. I could understand it.

I once saw Vanilla Ice driving in Miami Beach. He was behind the wheel of a white Suzuki SUV. It was definitely him. Did he drive that same SUV to shoot Suge in the ass? It's not impossible. Anything's possible.

Who shot Suge Knight in the ass? It remains a mystery, at least to me. I could google it, but I won't. I prefer the incident's shadowy, unimportant ambiguity.

It could have been Biggie's ghost. It should have been Biggie's ghost. I remembered a documentary I saw, about Biggie. In it, he sang a few bars of a song, and I was floored by his singing voice. Biggie should have been the next Barry White…

A pink shirt, in Miami, that doesn't narrow it down. I wore pink shirts in Miami. Many people wear pink shirts there. A pink shirt is just a pink shirt. It doesn't mean the person shot Suge Knight.

I knew a Colombian guy who got his arm bitten off by a shark while surfing in Miami Beach. He wore a lot of pink shirts. But he probably wasn't the assailant who shot Suge Knight, because if it was a dude with only one arm, that'd be a far easier suspect to apprehend. Probably not a lot of one-armed, pink-shirt-wearing Colombians running around Miami Beach, shooting people. There might be a couple of others, but there are not, like, thousands of them.

8

I tossed back over, lay on my back, feeling like a turtle lying on its shell. Shifting again in my bed, onto my side, my pillow was wet. Drool, sweat. It could be either. I'd been sweating profusely at night ever since I moved into this apartment.

My mind raced, snapped back. Who did it? Who shot Suge Knight in the ass? Like Oswald, he/she could already be dead. The person who allegedly shot Tupac was later shot and killed. Shot by a person on a motorcycle or shot as he rode a motorcycle. I can't remember. Maybe he was shot by Vanilla Ice. Or Suge Knight. But probably not the pink-shirt surfer, one-armed Colombian guy. The one-armed Colombian might have shot someone, but I don't think he shot the guy who shot Tupac. But I can't state this with 100% certainty…

Maybe Suge Knight killed Tony Soprano, at the end of *The Sopranos*, in the series finale. That would have been a better ending than it suddenly cutting out. Mind you, I sorta liked the obscurity, the fuck you-ness of that abrupt ending, but still, Suge Knight, strolling into the restaurant, Suge Knight breaking out nunchacku and attacking Tony. A brutal fight to the finish. That would have been more entertaining and satisfying.

They don't make TV shows like *The Sopranos* anymore. I miss that show…

I farted again and coughed. Shit, I hope I don't have the Lupus.

The power structure of China flashed through my mind. That they use prison labor. My computer, like most of the items in my apartment, was made in China. The computer I use was maybe built by a political dissident or just a plain old-fashioned rapist. I don't like thinking of rapists building my computers. But you

never know who's a rapist. The guy at the grocery store counter, the person next to you on the subway, he could be a rapist. He could be worse than Bill Cosby.

Bill Cosby was raping people. That still fucks with my head. I watched his show when I was a kid. I watched a rapist. I admired him. He was America's Dad. And he was drugging and raping people. A piece of me died when I learned about that. Although I was grown, had experienced hardships and had heard, seen many horrible things, Bill Cosby raping people, that kind of killed the last of my innocence.

I wondered if China has a Bill Cosby. A beloved celebrity who rapes people.

I'd read that China has a huge gender disparity. The country long had a government-imposed, strict limitation on child births, so they could tackle their exploding population, and families were limited to one child. The families there traditionally favored boys over girls so women would have selective abortions, or give girl babies up for adoption, and I heard stories of doctors casually snapping the necks of newborn girl babies, then tossing the dead babies into the garbage.

9

I unloosed a whimpering fart and again thought of China. I keep hearing about China. I keep thinking about China. There's always news about China. Just today, I'd seen a story about a man in Anhui, China, who went on a knife rampage, a stabbing spree, and he hacked five people to death and injured 15 others. I imagine he'll be in jail, making computers or phones, iPhones. Or they'll kill him. Quick too. I heard the death penalty in China is expedited, done in about the time it takes to order a sandwich at Panera Bread.

I constantly read of stabbing sprees in China. Why are people in continental China always stabbing each other? Attacking one another with knives? Why?

I contemplated the pros and cons of knife attacks as opposed to mass shootings. A mass stabber can't kill as many people, but a mass stabber could be less conspicuous, because knives don't make so much noise… Still, it'd be far easier to defend against a stabber, and if you're in good physical shape, you could even outrun him, whereas with a gun…

Then I contemplated just how many Chinese people would be stabbed at the condo next door. How many people would be raped there? Now only rats live there. Toxic rats. Rats maybe with COVIT and AIDS.

My stomach tightened, then rumbled, and my ass erupted, ejaculated a trombone honk of a fart, and then a bass-heavy fart that broke so violently it shook the coils of my mattress.

And the chattering in my consciousness continued, unabated… Like, what if everyone in China and India, all 2.4 billion people, what if all of them farted at the same time? I could see that causing Earth to break from its orbit, blasting the planet, caroming off into the dead of space, like a wayward pinball...

China. There are always stories about stabbing sprees in China. Stabbing sprees in kindergartens. I read elementary schools there have erected barriers, fencing around the exteriors of their campuses to stop stabbers.

Who the fuck wants to attack, slash and stab schoolchildren? What exactly was going through their minds? Who are these people? Yeah, it's annoying when a little kid is screaming in a restaurant or on a plane, but have a heart, man, fucking come on… Buy noise-cancelling headphones or some shit…

Maybe it was Lupus. Stabbing sprees in China, maybe it's a side effect of Lupus… You get Lupus, and then you just gotta go and fucking stab people…

I read China is like a giant prison, a giant concentration camp, that there are police, cameras and surveillance instruments everywhere, lampposts, walls and mirrors that can see, and that even private messages on social media are monitored. Well, if it's like a colossal prison, it doesn't surprise me people are stabbing each other, because that's what happens in prisons, right? In China, there are probably hundreds of people being stabbed every day.

China is weird. It has nets outside its factories so if the prisoners, workers jump, the nets will stop them from dying. I wonder if the nets could be trampolines, and bounce the jumper back up to the roof or window and then a boss man snatches them back in. Maybe with a fishing net or a pair of giant tongs…

China… China just oozes evil. China seems like the evilest, scariest, most pestiferous place in the world. I saw news footage of their government meeting,

and they had red flags, hammer and sickle flags adorned everywhere around a huge assembly hall. All their leaders, representatives were scary-looking men, serious-looking men, sharp-faced men, men with sullen eyes and hard jaws.

The Chinese leaders all looked like rapists. They all had evil, searching expressions on their faces. Probably planning, fantasizing about the next person they'd rape.

Didn't a high-ranking official in the Chinese Communist Party rape the tennis star Peng Shuai?

Bill Cosby could have been the leader of China. Although I heard most Chinese hate Black people, so Bill Cosby probably couldn't have been Prime Minister of China. But that scenario certainly would have made an interesting sitcom.

10

The pungent scent of alcohol returned, and I mechanically slid open my eyes again. In the corner of my room cut quite the scene. The crying young Thai girl, now dressed in a blue jean skirt and hot pink tank top, was being strangled by the ape I'd seen before.

The white ape was refulgent, immolating, steely blue phosphorescent flares licking over him; the flames dancing, reflecting in my eyes. The white ape's whole body blazing afire as he gripped his bearish hands around the young girl's pencil thin neck, strangling her, squeezing the soul from her bony body.

Watching the scene, a shadow of fear crossed my consciousness, and I thought about how if I killed someone, I'd probably strangle them, because that'd be the most satisfying method of murder. Particularly if I really detested the person...

Then the flaming ape cocked back his right hand, balled up a fist and began bludgeoning the young girl, each wild punch splashing into her face, each wild punch landing with the sound of an axe striking a block of wood. Blood oozing and streaking from the girl's nose and mouth, a chuckling hysteria erupted from the ape's throat, long jerking cackles that grew louder and higher with each blow he landed.

Then the flaming ape went silent as he tossed the poor girl to the floor, grabbed a clump of her jet-black hair and dragged the girl by her hair, pulling the poor girl across the floor like a bag of garbage. The girl gurgled blood, flailed, slapped at the ape's hands, kicked her legs, jabbered and screamed. But it was feckless. The flaming ape easily overpowered her.

The two continued their horror show to the balcony, where the flaming white ape promptly hoisted up and flung the small girl over the balcony railing, sending the girl screaming and tumbling, ten stories, to the pavement below. Then the girl's screaming abruptly ended when I heard a faint, tiny splat, like someone stepping on a grape.

The flaming ape calmly returned to my bedroom, scooped up a bottle of gin from next to my TV, twisted the cap off and began to guzzle it, flipping the bottle upside down, chugging it and chugging it, his fiery hand then clinching and cracking the bottle, the bottle bursting into a crystalline explosion of glass. Then the white ape once again disappeared, repaired into the darkness.

Only a hallucination. Only a hallucination. Only a nightmare… I reassured myself and pressed my eyes closed…

The air was without sound, but my mind was a confusing conflict of noise and imagery. I saw a tornado of incandescent white roaring through an unnamed city. I saw falling houses. There were building collapses, thuds of falling trees, flashes of flames and cable news reporters standing lamely in city streets, the reporters clutching microphones shaped like dildos, the reporters standing outside in the ass of the storm. The reporters with face tattoos, the reporters yelling out dick pill ads over the howling wind… The reporters bursting into fireballs… The fireballs then rolling, collecting mass, cataclysmic orange-black boulders swallowing city streets…

Dense black smoke rose from a river of fire. Then the scene faded into grainy video imagery of the living dead reporters dancing luridly in Russian graveyards. The dead reporters freezing in monster movie poses and confessing to cannibalism. Then I saw the reporters reincarnated as monitor lizards and jumping off high-rise buildings and other monitor lizards doing cannonballs into

another river of fire… Finally, the fiery river solidified into a misting white-green vapor, and the vapor formed into fuzzy green floaters, awhirl in a starless, coal-black sky…

11

My ears popped, like I'd just pulled out earplugs, and sounds of my psyche sounded once again. I'd recently been reading a lot of *Breitbart*. Earlier that day I'd read an article on the lab in Wuhan, the WIV, Wuhan Institute of Virology, where many hypothesize COVIT came from.

One lab. That's all it took. Maybe a worker there, being sloppy, led to unconscionable emotional suffering, the deaths of millions, and caused catastrophic economic damage. One lab. That was all it took, one lab leak, and everyone on Earth suffered.

I wondered who Patient Zero was. If that person was dead. If that person even knew. If a janitor at the lab caught the COVIT from a lab door not being shut or a loose zipper on a hazmat suit. I wondered if the Chinese government killed that janitor, like they did to that whistleblower doctor, Dr. Li, so the world would never know the truth.

Patient Zero… Who is Patient Zero?

Was he or she murdered by malevolent technocrats? I'd read that the Chinese Communist Party wants to be more likable, wants to have better PR, wants to make friends. Of course, that'll be hard, with COVIT, the lab leak, amid their other malfeasance. These days there's probably no country in the world as hated as China, thanks to its government.

Then I wondered why the guy in Anhui stabbed those people.

But would knowing change anything? Like the Vegas shooter, everyone wanted to know "the motive." But what would it matter? Maybe they were just mentally ill or were simply sadistic pricks who wanted to kill people, for whatever societal grievance. Why was I even thinking this?

I coughed again, then sprang up from the bed. I ran to the bathroom, hoping I could throw up. The urge simmered. Then the pull poked into my throat once more. I wondered if maybe a rat from the abandoned building had crawled down my throat as I slept. I wanted to vomit out the rat, see it scurry and flail its little rat legs as I pushed it from my throat and it plopped into the toilet bowl, into the toilet water, like the piece of shit it is.

But no. No rat. Nothing. I dry-heaved once again. Only a string of spittle dangled from the corner of my mouth. Then I ambled back to bed, closed my eyes and lay in the sticky wetness of my sweaty sheets and mattress.

Then I wondered where Suge Knight is… What he's doing… Isn't he still in jail? Didn't he join the Taliban? Or did he carjack an Uber driver and then go *Grand Theft Auto*, recklessly driving down a city sidewalk, randomly running down pedestrians?

Then I wondered where the Anhui Stabber is now. What the prisons in China must be like. Maybe the Anhui Stabber already died from the Wuhan Virus.

Another tremor rocked me, and I let out a gruesome, violent fart, a stink bomb of an eruption. It stank worse than a rotting body. Then Lebron James flashed into my mind.

Lebron James crying about social justice but turning a blind eye to the crimes of the Chinese government. Because it pays him. But how many others would ignore COVIT if the Chinese government gifted them, bribed them with millions of dollars? Most people, I bet. Why was I thinking this? I know Suge Knight would ignore any crime for millions of dollars. Suge Knight would throw his own mother off a hotel balcony for Lebron money. Suge Knight probably did throw his own mother off a hotel balcony.

Then I remembered that impassioned speech Lebron gave, lamenting the emotionally and financially taxing experience of Daryl Morey's Hong Kong tweet.

I pictured Lebron, in drag, a red dress, at the Beijing Winter Olympics. I pictured Lebron James ice skating. Lebron James ice dancing. Lebron, naked, addressing the Chinese parliament. Lebron wearing a triangle hat and stabbing people in Anhui. Those were the things flitting through my mind.

My skull felt like a jalopy, and my ears popped, my chest tightened, and I felt as if I were under water.

Choking, I gasped for breath, and I slid my eyes open and saw WebMD robots, the ghosts in my apartment, Suge Knight, Vanilla Ice, Chinese Emperor Xi Jinping, Sammy "The Bull" and a naked Lebron James, all of them, standing arms akimbo, all of them in a semi-circle around my bed. All of them staring and standing in judgment. All of them then throwing monitor lizard shit at me. All of them then pointing and yelling that it was Lupus, it was fucking LUPUS all along!

I gasped again, pressed my eyes shut, then popped them open. The clock read 5:21. Why does time shift so fast when I'm half-awake, half-asleep? COVIT time acted differently. It was time suffused with energy and lethargy, if that's possible.

Anything is possible, I remember Kevin Garnett screaming after the Celtics won a title in '08. I sat up in bed, shrieked "ANYTHING IS POSSIBLE" and then sank back down. My bed felt colder, slicked with sweat. My body choked and shook again. Then relaxed with celerity. There was no rat in my stomach. No-one, not even Suge Knight was there. There was only me and the soundtrack of my thoughts.

BANGKOK DURING THE PLAGUE

The streets were quiet. Dusty. Mildewed buildings boarded up. Countless stores, restaurants, and hotels renamed “For Rent” or “For Sale.”

Most of lower Sukhumvit had been mothballed or abandoned. This stretch of downtown sleeping dead.

The Wuhan Virus had struck again, had submerged Bangkok. It was apocalyptic, really, walking around, seeing shuttered storefronts, empty sidewalks, empty streets. In my ten years in Bangkok, I’d never seen so much of Sukhumvit Road empty, so many stretches of open road with few to no cars, vans, trucks, busses, or tuk-tuks. I didn’t even know what Sukhumvit Road looked like without its previously ubiquitous bumper-to-bumper traffic.

The majority of the road's remaining traffic appeared to be delivery drivers, most of them on motorcycles, motorbikes. And in bursts and waves they went on wailing by, engines screaming like banshees, others buzzing like hornets, all of them riding ferociously down open arteries, the concrete veins of the urban jungle.

Bangkok, the "Big Mango" or better yet, the "Big Durian" had been both becalmed and paralyzed by plague. Despite the baking sun, the mood and psyche of the city was cold. And dark.

Practically every establishment was shuttered. The puppet government, the ruling military junta had even closed the parks, so there was nowhere to run or walk, except along Sukhumvit Road, or along the alleys, the sois, if one was brave enough and aware enough to dodge the motorcycles whipping around, shooting out from carparks, driveways and sideroads like errant missiles.

And there were many of these brave souls. There were scattered walkers, runners, about all of them expats. The runners wore surgical masks, and one could see in their eyes the ugly glitter of malaise, listlessness, boredom and cabin fever. It was unclear if the runners were running for health reasons or mental reasons. Or both.

Aside from the runners, there were also a few locals, Thais, out using the empty streets as gyms, doing push-ups on the sidewalk, jumping rope in front of abandoned stores. I'd hoped to spot a couple Muay Thai boxers sparring but didn't. Maybe tomorrow, I thought…

Nearby a Thai doing push-ups on the street corner, I happened upon a bit of what could be described as karma. In a twist of irony, street vendors stood under umbrellas, selling fruits, noodles and barbeque in front of a shuttered 7-Eleven, as if the street chefs were reclaiming their turf from the Japanese mega-corp.

But altogether there weren't that many people outside. Which was highly unusual for Bangkok. Normally every street, every corner, every alley, every nook and

cranny would be peopled. But the plague had done away with that. The populous was in hiding. The people were in fear.

The fear of the plague was perhaps worse than the plague itself. A sense of fear pervaded Bangkok. It was in the air. Hanging and choking the city like a noose. It was in the air. Heavier than the humidity. There was not only fear of the virus, but there was a palpable sense of dread. A seeping fear feeding and spreading and multiplying from itself. The roaring bustle of Bangkok extinguished in an ugly squall of silence…

Stopping for a second to pop into an open 7-Eleven, for a cold drink, I instinctively went to sit down to the small dining counter by the automatic door, where I'd always sit. I noticed the automatic door was opening and closing, swishing, randomly, even as no customers were entering the store. The automatic door repeatedly chiming out "Hello, Welcome!" in its childish robot voice, to welcome ghosts.

Scanning around, I saw no ghosts. But I did see that the counter's stools were gone, and atop the counter were several stacked boxes of bottled water.

Yet more restrictions...

I felt a surge of sadness wash over me, not being able to simply sit down, have a cold drink and gaze out the window, voyeuristically watch the streets and the people. However, with so few people out anyway, I guess it didn't matter as much.

My front pocket buzzed, my phone rattling at my thigh, and I fished out my phone from my pocket and saw a disturbing news notification. It said that for the first time ever, the daily number of COVID deaths had surpassed daily deaths from road accidents. A truly startling statistic.

I trudged out the 7 feeling disappointed, feeling desperate for more non-recirculated air. Even if the air was tinged with diesel fumes, I didn't care. As long as it was outside air. As long as the scenery wasn't the walls of my apartment. Even walking down a narrow, patchy sidewalk full of holes and bumps and random tiny fire hydrants that seem installed to simply trip up pedestrians more

than anything else, even that, was better than sitting in my tiny apartment, with its white walls mocking me, the walls getting closer and smaller by the second.

Over the last few days, the sky had been milky, overcast, with sporadic bursts of tropical downpours, showers rapping my building's roof like machine gun fire. But not today. Today the sky was pure blue, blue as the Andaman Sea, and the sun was bathing Bangkok in a blissful patina of bright gold. The flood of sunshine on my skin invigorating, raising my lowly spirits.

I lifted my gaze toward the clear heavens, which looked clearer than I'd seen in months. Perhaps the plague reducing traffic had had an effect. Or perhaps the farmers outside the city weren't burning the rice fields. One can never be sure. Still, I strapped on my Vogmask tight, and set out to continue my trek.

Navigating Bangkok on foot has always been a challenge, due to the lack of sidewalks, pedestrian partitioning.

The sidewalks, when they do exist, often double as space for outdoor restaurants or street hawkers, peddlers, food carts and sometimes feature holes (unintentionally yet perfectly) designed to snap an ankle; or are "landmines," loose planks of pavement that erupt and splash a plash of wastewater, rainwater on pedestrians' feet and thighs and muddy up shoes; or whatever exists of the sidewalk will simply serve as an informal parking lot for motorbikes.

But there was less of that these days, due to the plague. There were actually long stretches of empty sidewalk, making it easier to navigate. Of course, one still had to be on guard for uneven pavement, holes, wastewater landmines, fire hydrant trip traps...

It was unnerving, in a way, to not see the impromptu restaurants, chaotic scenes of activity. There'd been many times when I'd lamented slogging around the overcrowded sidewalks or cursed a kamikaze motorbike under my breath. But now that they were gone, it was eerie and surprisingly unsettling. Glancing over the city's emptiness, its desolation, I suddenly felt as if I'd been punched in the stomach.

And I reasoned that it's the chaos, the insanity of Bangkok that not only makes it challenging to live in, but also gives the city its character. Without the Issan lady selling kebabs, without the granny selling noodles, without the row of motorcycle taxis ready to zip off, and without the pop-up ramshackle restaurants set up from the sidecar of a motorcycle, it just… didn't feel like Bangkok. Right then I could have been anywhere affected by the Wuhan Virus.

Passing by the touristy businesses was even sadder. There's nothing sadder than a closed, boarded up souvenir shop, or a bankrupt travel agent. Nothing sadder than seeing happy smiling faces on posters of waterfalls and museums and crocodile parks and realizing that all those tourist attractions are closed. Walking by hotels, restaurants, stores, all shuttered, possibly for good, heavy iron chains hanging on their doors. The chains hanging low, too, like thick lips, metal mouths, the mouths probably all too ready to say something sardonic or morose.

Amazingly, against all reason, I spotted a tanning salon. In downtown Bangkok. A most superfluous business idea! Maybe the worst ever!

However, in contrast to other businesses, the tanning salon remained open! I was perplexed. I was motivated to walk in, see just who would go to a place as sunny as Thailand and sit in a tanning salon, when they could simply step outside and burn themselves bronze. And how was such a place able to keep its doors open during the plague? It couldn't be real, I figured. I must be imagining things. Too much time in the sun. Surely no one would visit a tanning salon in Bangkok, right?

Then there were the homeless. I'd been living in downtown Bangkok, and I'd seen homeless, here and there, but it was nothing like many Western countries where homelessness is an epidemic of its own.

Nowadays, though, with the plague, the homeless numbers had skyrocketed, and while still not approaching Californian proportions, it was nevertheless striking to see such an increase.

There'd been way more beggars, too. The beggars sitting cross-legged, wai-ing passersby, on overpasses and footpaths, and some of the beggars were aggressive, calling out desperately, in broken English, feigning eating motions, shoveling an

imaginary fork to their mouths, crinkling their faces into contorted, pained expressions in hopes of eliciting sympathetic donations.

But most of the homeless I'd see weren't begging. They were sleeping. They lay supine or balled up, sleeping on slabs of cardboard, in front of abandoned storefronts. The homeless in Bangkok never seemed to have shoes, either, their feet dark and dirty and black as coal.

Across the street from my building, a row of stores, all of them closed, had lines of sleeping homeless in front of them, homeless under stripped awnings, homeless sleeping under "For Rent" or "For Sale" signs and many of the storefronts had been vandalized too, windows bashed and broken, spray-painted in crude graffiti, English curse words.

I wondered who the homeless were, where they came from...

Were they workers, unable to find a new job, unable to voyage home? Certainly a lot of service workers, construction workers, migrant workers had found themselves out of work, without money to return to their villages in the provinces, and had found themselves freshly homeless…

There'd been a couple homeless who were particularly striking. There was one, a woman, maybe 30 or 40 something, who, daily, wore the same dirty blue jeans and a long-sleeved gray sweatshirt, despite the tropical heat.

She had a thick mess of hair that'd been clumped into a wild bush of dreads, almost like a Rastafarian, and she'd been wandering up and down a lengthy pedestrian overpass, every day, her face fixed in a thousand-yard stare. Sometimes I'd see her sitting in a corner of the overpass, hugging her legs to her chest, rocking herself back and forth. I'd read about a few desperate, despondent locals jumping from overpasses and I hoped to not read anything like that about her.

Another homeless I'd been seeing was a chunky, older woman, maybe 50 to 60. She lived in the alley next to my building. She'd get naked, in the alley, and wash herself under a garden hose, then use the hose to clean her clothes, which she lay out, in neat rows, on the pavement, to dry in the sun.

At night, she'd sleep in front of an abandoned karaoke bar, sprawled out, lying on her big belly, in the doorway. The way she slept, how motionless she'd be, it was hard to know if she was alive or dead.

But I definitely knew when she was awake, because I'd hear her, her shrieks, her screaming. I'd hear her talk to herself, or to ghosts. She'd scream, in an explosive, shrill voice, in Thai, lighting up the whole alley with her sounds, her pained cries, her arguments with the air.

And how vociferously she would castigate the air! Often she'd scream and no one would stop her. Though occasionally a neighbor would pop their head out a window and say something, in Thai, to calm her agitated spirit, and then she'd be mostly silent, only murmuring to herself.

By and large, however, the homeless in Bangkok didn't appear mentally ill. And most didn't beg. They simply remained silent, sleeping on sidewalks. Just like the city, they were somewhere between barely alive and dead.

WHORES AND JOHNS IN BANGKOK

฿

The whore lay on the bed. Nude. Her shaved pussy exposed. Then she eased back into the bedboard, smiling, spreading her legs wider.

I was in the mood. But I lost my train of thought when a hammer drill shattered the silence.

But she didn't care. Just kept a smile on her heavenly face. And her pointy, pepperoni-sized nipples had hardened.

The whore always smiled, so this wasn't new. She even smiled when angry, steady beaming like an ad for dental floss…

Forcing the drilling sounds from my mind, I eyed and inspected the wondrous sight of her pussy. Her purplish outer pussy lips had always been curious to me, as one of the lips drooped downward, as if it were a pulled piece of chewing gum. I'd never seen a pussy like that.

Then the air thickened as her shapely legs created a capital V. Her nude brown body aglitter as if she'd been sprinkled in gold dust… Then the room started spinning…

฿฿

When I awoke, my apartment was hot and the whore was gone. As usual, she'd stolen half the fruit from the bowl on the table, plus a bag of salt and vinegar potato chips.

It's what she does, whenever she leaves. She steals food. Sometimes an entire bottle of milk or orange juice. But she's never stolen money or anything valuable.

Stories abound about thieving hookers in Thailand. And it can happen. Especially with streetwalkers. They're known for going Cardi B, drugging and robbing unsuspecting mongers, tourists. Especially in the red-light districts.

But mine never stole nothing. Except food.

฿฿฿

I don't even know her name. Well, I sort of do. But she changes her name every time I see her. One day she's Erika, then May, then Pop, then Beam, then New. So eventually I stopped calling her by any name and just refer to her as "*Teelak*," which translates to "sweetheart" in Thai.

But Teelak never calls me by my name.

Come to think of it, I don't think she's ever even asked me for my name…

฿฿฿฿

Following my morning routine, I jumped out of bed, dropped to the laminate floor, and did one hundred push-ups, then one hundred squats and sit-ups. Then I caught my breath and climbed back in bed, rubbing sleep from my eyes. Then I began a Thai language-learning video on YouTube…

Teelak speaks Thai and English to me. My Thai is minimal and so is her English. But we meet halfway, and translation apps help iron out any communication difficulties.

Whether speaking English or Thai, I've noticed Teelak often refers to herself in the third person. And I must admit I find this quirk endearing…

฿฿฿฿฿

The morning was fucking hot. My apartment was even fucking hotter than outside.

I'd gotten morning wood, so I began masturbating, thinking of the whore, suddenly seized by heady mental images, steamy scenes from our romp last night.

Slathering slippery coconut oil along the shaft of my cock, I sniffed in the sweet lingering scent of her perfume still clinging to my sheets...

Teelak is fucking hot... Her skin is pure gold. Besides her oddly shaped pussy lip, and the crescent-shaped scar on her elbow from a motorcycle accident, there really isn't a flaw about her. Her body is svelte yet soft and curvy and well-proportioned. Her ass, tits and legs could have been crafted by a sculptor. She's basically a living sexdoll. A little gold fuck-machine…

Moreover, her face is strikingly beautiful. Like a Buddhist angel. Like an ornate painting on a temple wall…

I once asked why she never modeled or acted, with those looks, and she said that plenty of girls look "better than her" and that her skin is "too dark." Apparently darker-complexion girls like her are less popular in Thailand, Asia as a whole.

But to me, the *farang*, with those curves and those cheekbones she couldn't be any more beautiful…

฿฿฿฿฿฿

My a/c cut off again and the sound of hammer drilling returned, filling my apartment with grinding noise and a tremendous vibration. So I put in my earbuds. Then I padded over to the balcony, pulled apart the French doors, and waved away a waft of exhaust fumes from a *motorsai* buzzing by below…

The balcony is where I often am. I like to sit out and sip whisky, smoke ganja, listen to hardcore hip hop, or meditation music… And watch the whores…

My balcony overlooks a row of bars across the street. Including where Teelak works.

She sits outside the bar with three or four heavily tattooed working ladies, and the ladies stare ropes, catcall and cajole male passersby through a hive of excited voices, explosions of laughter and high-pitched screams, with their mating calls of: “Hellooô, hansum man!” The bargirls offering expats and sex tourists alike drink specials and other…

(Teelak’s solicitations tend to be somewhat tame compared to the ladyboys at the bar next to hers… Like many working ladyboys, they’re known to engage in highly lubricious, aggressive offers of sexual services. At times literally seizing male pedestrians by the arm and playing tug-of-war, fighting to pull the passerby into the bar; and even occasionally grabbing male passersby by the nuts or buttocks…)

But on this smoggy, hot and humid monsoon season morning, with the sky gray as a clam, I didn’t see my Teelak anywhere…

When Teelak isn’t with me, that’s where she is. Across the street, under the awning, perched on a stool by the bar’s front door. Or she’s inside the bar. Or over at the adjacent hourly hotel, in the tiny room she rents there, where she services her customers.

I wonder if she’s with a customer now.

฿฿฿฿฿฿฿

Back inside, I clicked on the a/c and a puff of cool air swept over me. Then I pulled out my earbuds and found the hammer drilling had ceased.

But my heart skipped a beat when I saw my apartment had a strange visitor- one of the whore's johns from a fortnight ago.

Normally the johns that frequent Teelak's bar fit the typical Thailand "sex tourist" or "sexpat" profile: bald, floppy gut, hairy… The type, generally speaking, that one might expect to find in Bangkok, Phuket or Pattaya paying for sex.

But this customer stood out in that he was a young man, 20 to 23 years of age, tallish, and in good shape, handsome too, with a sort of 1998 Justin Timberlake look, that curly, ramen noodle hair thing going on.

Now the john stood in my apartment, which was curious. He was in camo shorts, a white wifebeater and knockoff Gucci flip-flops, and his face was screwed into a goofy smirk.

Then he vanished. Then reappeared next to me, aglow, a spectral silver cast silhouetting his cut, muscular frame.

As I sat down at the table, the effulgent young john sat down next to me, and I poured him a coffee mug full of Japanese whisky, then poured a tall glass for myself.

I slugged back a big gulp of whisky, and as the whisky warmed my stomach, I thought of Bukowski and Pete from *Private Dancer* and wondered what they'd do in this situation…

Then I returned my attention to the young john and hoped he'd used a rubber, especially since I knew the whore had her slip-ups. Oh yes, I knew that for sure…

My buddy Tony from the Irish bar says that he's been with over one hundred hookers, most of whom he hit raw. And that he "never caught nothing" and that you'll only catch AIDS if you "put it in the dirt patch…"

(Still, I can't help but recall the classic Eddie Murphy stand-up bit from *Raw*, ironically, and posit that regularly fucking hookers without a condom is akin to playing Russian Roulette with your dick…)

((Tony also confided he avoided using condoms with hookers because hookers and brothels collect the condoms, sometimes give or sell the sperm to single Thai women wishing to have a mixed-race, lighter skin baby, and that that could be used for blackmail or to extort a *farang*…))

“ … “

Young JT, my eskimo brother, never said a word. Wouldn’t drink hair of the dog either. He just sat calmly, slouching in the shield-shaped chair, smirking at me, right in the spot where I’d bent the whore over the table last week...

฿฿฿฿฿฿฿฿

Some asshole once told me that if you have sex with someone, especially unprotected sex, then you’re having sex with everyone they had sex with. If that’s the case, then ’98 JT and me have fucked thousands.

I sipped my smoky Japanese whisky, neat, and said to young Justin Timberlake, “Think of how many eskimo brothers we have.” Glancing at him, across the table, his eyes glazed over in a way that reminded me of frosted glass…

“Think of packing a football stadium with all our eskimo brothers… All of us naked as skeletons… With Beam alone on the stage… her in the spotlight… the cynosure… her stripping to “Wet Ass Pussy” for the whole fucking football stadium… her in that burgundy thong she wears… her pulled pussy lip fighting the fabric… her twerking to pyrotechnics… She could be the new fucking Madonna…”

฿฿฿฿฿฿฿฿฿

When I get too drunk, I'll go Al Gore with the fuzzy mathematics and attempt to craft a hypothesis about how many people Teelak has fucked.

If she does one, two, or three dudes a day, that's maybe 60 per month. Then that's 720 men she fucks in a year. And she's been in Bangkok for 10 years, she said, so… that's roughly 7,200 men she fucked.

Then there might have been days where she fucked 5 or 6 men. Maybe 7 or 8. Perhaps a busy day, fucking 10 people, so it could be more...

(I talked to Tony about this, and he said "numerology" is why whores aren't often mad if a john prematurely ejaculates… more time for the next customer… And that he doesn't think about a pussy's mileage or a whore's prior customers because "anything" could be going up or down, in and out of a pussy- dicks, dildos, tongues, fingers, fists, babies, piss, queefs, tampons, you-name-it, so "why worry" and "just enjoy the rental.")

Then there are customers she doesn't even fuck. Lonely geezers who go to her bar just for conversation or to sit with someone as they drink, so they don't have to be alone.

Teelak told me, too, how she had a "customer grandpa" who "couldn't fuck anymore" and that he sometimes paid her $300 to keep him company for the day, come over to his condo to cook him lunch…

But when I go full retard, get fucking fucktard drunk, I ruminate, contemplate Teelak's past, and I'll wonder if she's in any amateur videos on YouPorn. Or if my Teelak is on "Asian Street Meat" being given the sobriquet "cum-guzzling slut" as she gets skull-fucked…

And I'll flashback to urban legends, stories I heard of Indian and Japanese guys into gangbanging hookers. And I'll wonder if she has ever had group sex, been fucked by more than one guy at a time…

… In a way, she's like a porn star…

She certainly fucks like a porn star…

฿฿฿฿฿฿฿฿฿฿

My buddy Tony told me that he's been seeing professionals for the last five years. Because they're better in bed. And that he finally arrived at an age where he'd tired of the games, tired of the chase, and that with "pay for play" it "keeps things simple."

Tony said he really went down this route after watching a buddy of his lose $100,000 to a bargirl *sinsot* (dowry) scam. And that the "poor geezer then

lost his mind," became a born-again Christian and had taken to riding a bicycle around Sukhumvit Road, brandishing a crucifix, like a rifle, shouting nonsensical blessings at random passersby…

Tony told me that the sex industry in Thailand is different. That there's not much human trafficking and that "all the women in the foreigner-facing sex industry are over 20" and that the "fiddlers" from the 90s and early 00s got chased out of Southeast Asia, and that today's women choose the profession, and that many have husbands and boyfriends and that some even have office jobs, normal jobs.

Tony says that "aside from blowjobs," he doesn't look "down on whores." He thinks that a lot of dudes would do the profession too if they could get paid to fuck women. He's also sure that it's a job that will one day be automated, and probably without much public outcry.

"But could the fuckbots provide companionship?" I asked. To which Tony grunted and went on to say that not all whores have the gift of gab and some are without poker faces. That it's easy to see their disinterest or discontent… That he gets "the hell outta there" if they're cold.

But Teelak is a thespian. I can never tell what she's thinking.

I feel like I know her and yet I don't know her.

I do know a little about her background.

I know her hometown has a name I can't pronounce and is a remote farming village in the northeast of Thailand, the area known as "Isaan."

I'm guessing her hometown is the sort of place where it's hand-to-mouth. A place where if you don't work, you'll probably starve and die… A place where there's no handouts or welfare and where no one gives you shit…

She said she'd worked before at a factory, assembling Barbie dolls, and as a farmer, planting rice.

She'd mentioned a young son. And she mentioned a husband, a meth runner/policeman. And that her husband took better care of his fighting roosters than her. And that her husband'd had another wife and kid. And that when she discovered her husband's infidelity, she split for Bangkok to do bar and dirty massage work…

She said she sends money home and returns to Isaan from time to time to help her parents plant rice...

But she doesn't talk too much about her family or past… Most of the time she's over, she's eating or drinking, or we're fucking or watching funny TikTok videos of animals on her phone…

Teelak doesn't ask me many personal questions. She's never asked about the scars on my legs. But she once asked about all the pills.

You know, I've never felt comfortable complaining, to her, about my ghosts, or the night terrors… or the weight of the uniform…

Sometimes I wanna tell her… how every night I'm watching my own worst memories. How every night, I'm a spectator…

I could see Teelak being a good listener… Good as God...

฿฿฿฿฿฿฿฿฿฿฿

I hope for Teelak's sake that she's saved money. That she has something to fall back on…

She said she'd been attending a training course to become a nail and hair stylist, that she might open her own beauty salon someday.

But she'd been slacking off in the course, said she was often too lazy to go…

Teelak told me the other week she'd started a Tinder profile… I'm not sure if she's on OnlyFans or not… And the other day she mentioned she joined a few mail-order bride and similar looking-for-international-love websites…

While sitting on the toilet to piss, with the bathroom door open, the other night, Teelak told me a fortune teller told her that this year she'd find a "foreign husband." She said she wanted a man over 50, but not one that was too "old" like the one her friend Pear had found.

Lifting the bum gun to her crotch, Teelak told me Pear, at 26, had had a fiancé, a Frenchman aged 68. But the Frenchie had suddenly croaked before Pear "got anything from him."

฿฿฿฿฿฿฿฿฿฿฿

After admonishing me for reeking of ganja, a few nights ago, Teelak punched me in the arm and pinched my left nipple. Then she said, coolly, that I forgot her birthday and that she'd turned 41…

I had always thought she was about 33 or 34…

Come to think of it, though, at certain angles and lighting, she does kinda look her age.

฿฿฿฿฿฿฿฿฿฿฿฿

10 AM. And I was already feeling fucked up, melting into my mattress, watching Phillies highlights on my phone. Then I started thinking of her, wondering if today I'll see my Teelak...

She visits in the mornings and afternoons, but more often late at night.

She shows up caked in layers of sultry, glittery makeup and eyeshadows, neon lipsticks and with her hair dyed different colors.

Sometimes she's in a sundress. And sometimes she's in jean cutoffs riding up so high her ass is hanging out the hems.

Normally she shows up unannounced…

The first thing she always does is leave her silver spike-heels by the door. Then she's air-kissing, and I love how her lips incarnadine and expand as she smooches at me... Then she goes for a shower in my bathroom, and never has she complained of the sewage-like, fecal scent drifting up from the bathroom drains…

Then, depending on my degree of drunkenness, we might drink whisky and fuck to Megan Thee Stallion songs on her phone.

But when I'm too drunk, she just showers and helps me puke, then steals food and leaves…

Every once in a while, though, perhaps for Karma's sake, she'll leave me a small plastic box or two of the Thai coconut pancake dessert she knows I like…

Last week Teelak was flashing her angry smile… bug-eyed and arching her eyebrows, crossing her arms and stomping her foot, accusing me of having "lots of other girls" over. Teelak flaming with jealousy because she found a long curl of black hair in the bathroom sink...

My buddy Tony told me that professionals in Thailand tend to be possessive. Even though they're out canvassing Soi Cowboy, Nana Plaza, fucking a whole planeload or two of tourists each month, many Thai sex workers expect a type of customer loyalty and abhor the "butterfly man," the man who covets and fucks many different girls.

But I've never divulged or answered any of Teelak's questions... I just mask myself in a goofy smile. Laugh and smirk like a local…

Recently, though, she's been needling me more and more, imploring me to take her out for dinner and dancing. Smiling at me, through boiling teeth, inquiring… asking why I mostly just sit in my room drinking whisky, reading Russian novels.

Or why I don't have a Christmas tree. Or any pictures on my walls, aside from a lone Phillies banner (or "Peel-lees" as she calls them).

She's also been asking me to take her to America. She said she wants to see snow. And she's been talking about buying a house, looking at pictures of real estate online.

But she's always gone whenever I wake up.

฿฿฿฿฿฿฿฿฿฿฿฿฿

Teelak likes purple nurples. She likes to hit me with hard punches, slaps on the arms.

She chastises me in Thai, but I can only gleam half of it. She seems especially enraged whenever I call her beautiful, hissing "*bok wan dtalot!"* (always a sweet talker!) with bitter conviction…

My Teelak sure has an economy of words. She's not into disquisitions. She's quite blunt and tells me if my Thai sounds like shit or if I'm getting fat or if I shave myself a mohawk haircut that she thinks looks stupid…

But no matter which way her mood swings, and even if she's just being plain belligerent, I still think she's beautiful…

LOAN SHARK CAPITAL

The food cart brought in anywhere from $10 to $70 per day. That normally meant $300 to $2000 per month.

But that didn't include payments to local police- $50 per month- nor did it include the cost of ingredients, food packaging, cooking gas, plus gas for the motorbike. Such expenses generally added up to around $300 per month.

At month's end, and if it were a good month, they'd be left with around $1650 in profit. And if the month wasn't so good, maybe $150 in debt.

Of course none of this included personal expenses. Living costs, food, utilities, rent. A worse month could reach $300 in the red…

"But this shouldn't be," Peechai lamented. He and his wife of 10 years sat next to one another on their bamboo mat, which doubled as their bed, in their windowless, sweltering, sparsely furnished one-room apartment.

"The math added up to $1000 per month," Lamyai, his wife, agreed, "but that didn't take COVID into account."

"COVID," Peechai snorted, before taking a prolonged sip from a bottle of rice whiskey.

"There used to be loads of foot traffic. Office workers, the tourists."

"They didn't lie to us. We could have easily earned $800 per month. The granny selling coconut cakes was once making $2000. HiSo office workers were sending their assistants to pick up cakes from her. The sausage and sticky rice seller too. Both made enough, eventually, to retire back to Cambodia."

"But we are nowhere close to retirement."

"We can't worry about that now. Right now, we don't even have enough saved to get us to next month. We're going to need a loan."

"No…" Peechai moaned, his nostrils quivering, then his jaw muscles clenched up, as if he were about to puke.

But Lamyai was unmoved; shaking her head, she lamented, "It's the only way to get us through..."

Arrangements were made. A $4000 loan. With 20% interest. It had to be repaid, in full, within a year, or else the interest rate increased to 35% and an additional 20% on the principal would be added to the total.

Their lender was not a standard banker. The lender was a nearby neighbor. A diminutive elderly man. The old man and his family ran a hole-in-the-wall noodle shop just off the main road and lived in the apartment on the upper floor of the shophouse.

The old man had earlier left a lasting impression on Peechai, as he looked like the Buddha, with his bald head and potbelly, and Peechai had initially viewed this as a positive omen.

The Buddha lookalike's son, a jowly, muscular, kickboxing enthusiast greeted Peechai with a *wai* and showed Peechai up to the old man's cramped but clean apartment.

The apartment appeared almost like an Asian museum. Its living room so full of Chinese calligraphy, paintings of rivers and mountains and various golden Buddhas statues sitting, standing, and reclining everywhere.

Peechai passed an altar, with flashing red lights and black and white photos honoring the family's ancestors, before entering the old man's tiny office, which was also heavily adorned in Buddhist and Daoist paintings, calligraphy scrolls and statues and figurines.

It was there that over a glossy, mud-brown wooden desk the loan terms were discussed.

The Buddha lookalike lender spoke in a soft cadence, his words measured, his voice low, calm and reassuring.

However, his son spoke in a booming, bass-heavy voice, a voice that reverberated, shook Peechai's soul. Looking over at the son, Peechai surmised that the young man might have been a tiger or a crocodile in another life. The young man exuding a predatory energy…

Peechai received a cash-filled manilla envelope. Then the lender's son escorted the aspiring restauranteur to the door. Before Peechai left, the young man pointed to the phone cradled in his palm, then nodded to a picture flickering on the phone's screen.

In the picture was a beggar, a middle-aged man who'd been maimed. Disfiguring burns covering his face. The beggar looking like something from a horror movie.

Then the lender's son flicked the screen to another picture. This one of a grimacing middle-aged man, the man missing an arm, the man kneeling on a street corner, with his lone arm extended, holding out an empty plastic cup.

"Please pay on time," the bass-heavy voice spoke. The words edged with a discomforting politeness.

Peechai and Lamyai had been banking on the virus situation to improve. For businesses downtown to reopen. For tourists to return. But time went on and the virus only worsened. Every day, higher numbers of infections were reported.

Sales were scarce. With Bangkok practically a ghost town, the couple were lucky to bring in $10 per day. Some days they made nothing.

When the first installment of the loan was due, the couple panicked, knowing they'd be unable to pay. They fretted over the pictures they'd seen, those poor disfigured souls forced to beg. They knew the lender's son or another goon would be showing up soon. And they did.

The lender's son came calling, his deep voice resonating, echoing off the walls. He'd brought along two other goons, also appearing as kickboxers, also covered in tattoos. The pack of young thugs showing up at 10 p.m. to the couple's apartment, hammering on the flimsy front door, demanding the first installment.

The ruffians cornered Peechai, began backing him up to the grimy mustard-colored wall by the bathroom. Peechai could smell a whiff of sewage pushing up from the tiny, stinky bathroom sink. Beads of healing sweat streamed down his forehead and lower back and he lifted his hands high in the air as if being busted by the police.

Smelling the stink of shit, his heart jumped like a monkey in a cage as he contemplated how he'd be beaten.

It was at this moment that Lamyai emerged with a tray of drinks- a bottle of beer and three clear plastic cups half-full of rice whiskey.

"Please," Lamyai said, in a calm voice, though her eyes were red and wet, "please, let's sit down and discuss this. There must be another way."

The men craned their necks at Lamyai. One swept his gaze over her figure, which, even under her loose-fitting pajamas, was visible and quite fetching, quite sharply curved.

The lender's son grunted to the other men, who nodded and the three repaired to the pink plastic seats around the small foldable table in the center of the room. Lamyai handed Peechai the bottle of beer, and then she served the men, who each wasted no time guzzling the whiskey, slamming the clear cups down to the thin table. One of the ruffians even crunched the cup in his hand, staring ominously at Peechai as he did so. All the young thugs looking like tigers eying prey.

Within seconds, though, the menacing young men's faces blanched, then twisted to mortified. Then they began convulsing and coughing. Eyes popping. The tattooed pack wheezing and clapping their hands to their necks and faces, struggling to breathe, choking on words. The young men then keeling over, out of their chairs, falling to the floor and retching until they finally seized up, froze in place.

Peechai crept forward, stopped and stood above the young men's fresh corpses, staring, aghast, like he'd seen a ghost.

But Lamyai wasted no time before checking the lifeless men's pulses. Finding nothing, she rifled through each's pockets, lifted out their wallets, phones, and sizable cash wads, then carefully plucked off the goons' gold chains, amulets, and rings, stuffed the pilfered treasure into her knock-off Charles and Keith purse.

Peechai's mouth tightened as he stood frozen in place. Then he felt his jaw loosen, and it was as if a circle of golden light were rising above Lamyai as she rose to her feet.

"We'll take an overnight bus back to the village," Lamyai said. Her words like a warm gust of wind. "Just after we visit the old man for a glass of whiskey," she went on, in a tone that told only of tranquility.

TAXI RIDE IN SHANGHAI

At the hotel's immaculate breakfast buffet, I overheard an American businessman, at the next table, talking to his coworkers about the time in Shanghai he was being driven to a construction site.

The taxi driver was driving recklessly, even for mainland China, and the businessman chortled, said that in China there are "no rules" on the road. It's every man for himself.

The taxi driver, the businessman went on, was a slender man, who had a ridiculous combover, like what remained of his jet-black hair just plastered to the

left side of his skull, and that the driver been quiet. But then the driver began speaking, suddenly, in near-perfect English, of how his family was displaced, forced from their home, their village of centuries, due to the construction of a trendy new English-named shopping/condominium complex.

The driver was tearing up, honking at everything. His driving becoming even more erratic and herky-jerky, full of fits and stops, sharp turns. The businessman getting whiplash. The driver's voice raising, strained and venomous. The driver recounting how his wife was dragged from her home, beaten and arrested, and his wife's parents had had their belongings carted out and dumped in the street.

The closer the taxi got… the larger the construction site grew in the windshield… the angrier the driver became. The driver's hands trembling, a look of blood in his eyes.

"All this to build shopping mall. Shopping mall, build shopping mall!" the driver kept repeating.

The businessman said that he feared the cab driver might turn on him. That he'd heard of a French businessman recently stabbed on the street in Shanghai and that no one stopped to help and that the police in China generally don't do anything aside smoke cigarettes and play on their phones and that you'd need to bribe them to do anything. And that they'd certainly never side with a foreigner, even a businessman from a Fortune 500 company...

The American businessman was really panicking, silently. Worried that any second the driver might jerk the car to the side of the road and break out a knife or blunt object.

But once they reached the construction site, the driver hushed silent. The businessman then paid the driver, cautiously, and stepped out of the car.

YOU SHOULD FIND A HUSBAND

ɷ

Soothing synths, waterfalls, and gong chimes sounded softly across the dim, rectangular room. A rosy aroma of massage oil wafting about. An overhead a/c was gently whirring, its icy blasts tickling at the tourist's skin.

"You should find a husband," said the tourist, his voice quietly breaking.

The young girl giggled, shook her head and furtively lowered her gaze, then went back to whipping her hands up and down the tourist's shin, seemingly using all

the energy she could muster as she did so. Understandably, too, considering the tourist's size.

The tourist, compared to most of the slender Southeast Asians, was practically a Big Foot. He stood at 6'4, and was wide-bodied, with thick bones.

The tourist, despite his considerable mass, however, was not a young man. Far from it, in fact. And his countenance told of time's rough hands. The lines crisscrossing the folds of his face cut deep as dried riverbeds. Gathering time had also taken the tourist's color; his fuzzy coat of body hair, his neatly trimmed Hemingway beard, his wavy mop of hair… all had silvered.

That coat of silvery-gray body hair, along with his skin's pallor, and heavyset size, had the locals joking, nicknaming him, in Thai, "หมีขั้วโลก" (*mee kohlok*) - the "Polar Bear."

Despite the locals' barbs, which he didn't pick up on, the tourist certainly didn't lack self-confidence. Quite the contrary. He had a heavenly-high opinion of himself. Moreover, he looked down on many of the other *farangs* he'd see around Bangkok. He'd seen countless Thailand expats, around his age, that were, in his eyes, in far worse shape. Most of them far thicker in the waist, with big Buddha bellies far floppier than his.

Not to mention the clothes they'd wear… While the tourist was no fashionista, he was practically a GQ cover model compared to some of the losers he'd see around Bangkok. The fat, pathetic old men in their torn, tattered beer tank-tops, dirty cargo shorts, flannel shirts, corduroy pants and even a few in clunky, black, Velcro retard shoes…

And while most of the losers had fat heads, heads bald as a baboon's ass, some of those who did have hair, their hairstyles, for fuck's sake, the tourist would think, cringing just looking at them… Like the loser the tourist had been seeing on Sukhumvit Road, the raisin-faced skeleton, that zombie-looking creature whose scalp was eagle bald, yet this particular shitbird had a sloppy mane of silver locks flapping from the back of his skull, almost an "old man mullet."

Or worse, the "old man bun" Eurotrash. Those pitiful fucks with their gray hairs pulled into man buns.

What a bunch of losers, he'd think, glaring at them in disgust. How poorly they've aged… How poorly they'd endured the onslaught of time… Unlike him…

Damn right, especially compared to those fuckballs, he was a silver fox. And that's what he saw in his bathroom mirror, when he'd flex his biceps after a shower, admiring his reflection, thinking of how well he'd aged, how well he'd matured, just like a fine whiskey.

Whenever he'd shave, he'd stop to appreciate his strong jaw, his cleft chin, and he'd feel so handsome, so dashing. He was a proper gentleman. He was what every man should look like. Unlike those sad souls around lower Sukhumvit, who'd aged worse than milk. Some aging even worse than Axl Rose.

But not him, the tourist would think, running his fingers through his thick, moon-silver hair. And he'd grin, devilishly, happy to admire his reflection anytime he saw it, fancying himself as resembling a 1990s, early 2000s Sean Connery, or a 2010s George Clooney, albeit slightly more handsome…

"You are beautiful," the tourist continued, flashing a flirty, pearly white smile at the masseuse, "why hasn't any man married you yet?"

The young girl blushed again, keeping her eyes locked on the tourist's legs and feet, her slim body moving rhythmically as she kneaded and palmed at his plump thighs.

Her strength certainly surprised him, a girl this tiny, with this degree of power and a grip this tight. She really had a vise-grip. Might be from toiling in those rice fields, the tourist pondered, knowing that a lot of these masseuses were migrant workers, came from the countryside...

"Just how old is she?" a wispy voice inquired and faded away, echoing in his thoughts.

The tourist guessed the girl's age at about 25, though it could have been higher or lower. He'd always been bad at guessing Asians' ages.

Looking down, he saw his long feet cradled in the young girl's small, caramel-colored hands, and for the first time, he awed at just how white his body hair had become. Even his feet, the hair on his toes, had all gone white.

Another voice popped in his head, intruding like a loud, sudden TV commercial. This voice was an aggrieved one. It was accusatory. Full of guttural sounds and hisses. And it was castigating him, mocking his age, his weight, everything about him. But then familiar, comforting thoughts of football arose in his head, fogged in, and the aggrieved voice quieted, became a garbled hum, before fading to weakening bursts of plosive white noise…

It'd been years since the first gray hair had appeared on his head, atop his right temple. But he could remember it like yesterday. He'd found the gray hair one winter morning, after shaving. In the bathroom mirror, over the sink, he'd leaned forward, inspected his sideburns, spotted the lone gray and knew instantly, exactly what it was and what it meant. It was a message. A message from Death and Death's son, Father Time. A message that the clock was ticking.

It was around this discovery that he first started asking himself existential questions. What did he want? Beyond the superficial, the materialistic, the sybaritic… he was unsure…

๒

The tourist hadn't known exactly what he wanted. But he had arrived at a point where he realized that whatever it was that he wanted, he wasn't getting.

His life felt boring, meaningless. At his office job, every day was the same. Every day it was the same cold faces, the same packed subways, the same casefiles, the same monotonous meetings and memos. The same soporific whir of the central heating/cooling system. The same trivial conversations with coworkers about the same stupid TV shows.

Then he'd come home to watch those same stupid TV shows. Not so much because he liked them, but because he felt like he was supposed to. That if he didn't, he'd have nothing to say at the watercooler. Although the laugh-tracks, canned applause, and one-liners did ease his mind, if nothing else.

While watching TV, he'd eat TV dinners, delivery pizza, and potato chips. He'd drink soda. Once, he was drinking the same soda as he saw on a TV ad. In the commercial, there was a man his age and build, also alone in an apartment. Then the man is cracking open a can of the soda and instantly is transported, beamed, ala *Star Trek*, to a wild beach dance party filled with scantily clad women and pumping loud music.

But that hadn't happened to him when he opened the soda. Or when he drank it. And on a quiet, intrinsic level, it bothered him that it didn't happen. He'd bought the same soda, but no girls in bikinis appeared. He wasn't beamed to an exotic island. It wasn't fair, he softly raged. But he let the feeling pass and forgot about it once the sitcom came back on.

The tourist's weekends weren't much better. He'd go to the same bar with his coworkers and occasionally he'd go on the same dates with the same boring women.

He started wondering what more was out there. He wanted to discover the world, to travel, to see distant, exotic lands while he still had time, before he got too old. While on the crowded subway, his face ruddy from the blustery cold, his fingers

numb, the tourist suddenly had an epiphany. He happened upon the cruelty of life, that he'd slave away in an office, give a multi-national corporation his prime years, then finally, when he got to retire, he'd be a toothless, incontinent old man, wearing adult diapers and shitting himself.

Standing in that packed subway car, full of frowning faces, the tourist knew, he knew then and there, that he had to do something, he had to find something more…

That gray hair, that morning, had put his mind in motion, had put the fear of time in him. That gray hair had instilled in him the idea that time was tugging him further out to sea. And he knew he needed to fill a void.

One wet, cold and ugly fall evening, when he was half-drunk, sprawled out on the couch, the action movie *Kickboxer* came on TV. It was set in Thailand, which, to him, seemed like the farthest place away from his dreary, landlocked landscape. With its golden temples, sun-splashed beaches and bustling cities, Thailand, to him, was probably the most exotic place on the planet. He had to go there. It wasn't just drunk talk, either, it was an omen, a sign from the universe. He *had* to go there. He *had* to be there.

So it was decided. He'd visit Thailand during his next vacation.

And thus began his history of visiting Thailand. The 14-hour plane ride was a beast, but sleeping pills helped. He'd always be sure to book a window seat, and once airborne, he'd tilt his head and gaze down at the endless white patches of land and the bent spine of his boring city, watching with joy as they shrunk and then vanished beneath creamy, cottony blankets of clouds. Then he'd feel the euphoric rush of the pills surging through his bloodstream as he'd lean back in his seat and doze off, happily knowing he'd be waking up to palm trees and fun and sun in paradise.

๓

The tourist's every trip to Thailand was almost the same. But unlike the monotony of his job, the similarity was comforting rather than defeating.

His every trip to Thailand was like this: First, he'd stay a few nights in Bangkok, strategically near Nana Plaza, Bangkok's biggest red-light district. Then he'd fly south to a lush tropical island and stay at a seaside resort. There, he'd swim in the Andaman Sea, eat heaps of mangoes, and when the sun paled, he'd retire to his suite to sip cold beer and watch the stars from his balcony. Then he'd fly back to Bangkok, for a night or two, hit the go-go bars and massage parlors once or twice more, before finally flying home.

Every trip was practically identical. And that was the point. He didn't want it any other way.

And why would he? From the first time he'd set foot in Thailand, he'd loved it, had taken an immediate shine to the country, its warm weather, January sunshine kissing his skin, its friendly faces and easy living…

And he especially loved the affordable beautiful women.

The women were one of the biggest reasons why he kept coming back. The "bar girls," ladies at bars, who'd provide intimate companionship for a minimal fee, they became his fetish. They were the best-looking women he'd ever seen, too. Drop-dead gorgeous. With or without makeup. And they were almost all slender, with curves cut from stone and with jaw-droppingly sexy, exotic features, hyperborean cheekbones, upcurved eyes like temple eaves, and golden, honey-colored skin… Skin softer than the finest silks…

Better yet, the Thai women were outgoing, fun. Most spoke near-perfect English, could converse freely, and loved to joke around and have a good time. Unlike the escorts he'd hired in his home country, the Thai ladies weren't hurried, shifty-eyed, or nervous, and didn't make it feel like they were doing anything wrong…

Not that he cared if they *really* liked him. Although they sure acted like they did. The Thai bar girls were damn near Oscar-caliber actresses, smiling, nodding along, and laughing at all his corny jokes. And in bed, they were like porn stars, AVN

Award worthy, true professional fuck-machines easily capable of satisfying any and every carnal urge.

Not to mention the diversity… of pussy…

In Thailand, he could have a college-aged girl (18-23 y/o) one night, then a more mature girl (28-36 y/o) the next. A thinner girl one night, a thicker girl the next. Darker skin one night, lighter the next. Big tits, small tits, juicy butt, swimsuit model butt, tall, short, et cetera, et cetera… Thailand, to him, was basically one big buffet of beautiful pussy, a pussy paradise…

The tourist simply loved the ability to choose, being able to walk into a bar and pick whichever woman he wanted, rather than walking into a bar, in his cold country, hoping and praying he could find a lady who liked him.

In Thailand, all the women at all the bars liked him.

And so he kept coming back, every year. Though he'd have a killer experience, every trip, still, there were a series of voices in his head, shrill, squeaky voices, that'd speak up, from time to time, during his visits to the Kingdom. The voices following him like a guilty conscience. The voices appearing as audio intrusions, in daytime, and at night, too. And sometimes in dreams. The voices sometimes manifesting in different stages of sleep. The voices sometimes personified and sounded by shadowy, veiled figures, with eyes like black pebbles…

The voices told of self-doubt. And hate. The voices whispering to him that the Thais were all fakes. That their smiles were an act, a pantomime. That behind their smiles, was only emptiness. And faceless greed. That everything in Thailand was fake. All the buildings, everything, it was a mirage. It was artifice. That it shouldn't be there.

Between barhopping in Bangkok, the tourist sometimes took the Skytrain, and he'd silently stand by the train window, watching the passing scenery of the city as if he were inspecting a painting in an art gallery. Here and there, with the city moving under his feet, the tourist would glance over at a vacant lot and see it reclaimed by jungle, tropical foliage, and the voices would fade in, tell him that Bangkok was a swamp. It was all a jungle. And that's what it's supposed to be. It's supposed to be a jungle, with crocodiles, snakes, silver streams, waterfalls, exotic birds...

"None of this… None of it… None of it… should even be here…"

From time to time the aggrieved voices would appear, in this way, and intrude on his holidays. They'd boo and hiss. Declare that he was a fraud. Declaim him a lecherous sexpest. Proclaim that he was exploiting people in a third world country. And that even worse, he was being exploited himself.

When the voices got too loud, he'd quiet them with booze and soothing thoughts of football. But, like a cockroach, they were there, and stayed there, infesting, alive in the walls of his mind...

Back home, back in his cold country, the cockroach voices would normally quiet. Or, strangely, they'd shift their tone to saccharine, to nostalgia. The voices pining to be back in Bangkok, in Thailand, where everything was as it should be.

The tourist would fantasize, plan his next trip to Bangkok. Doing so would help him avoid lamenting too much about his unsatisfying job, unsatisfying local women…

The local women- ugh. He'd be perpetually disappointed that he couldn't find anyone comparable to the Thai ladies. The local women, Western women, to him, had become disgusting. Useless. They seemed so masculine too. They'd have short hair, talk like men, act like men, dress like men, and their noses were always too big, their frames fat as milk cows. The local women just totally, in every conceivable way, turned him off.

Worse yet, unlike in Asia, he'd found fat women being glorified, put on front pages of magazines, and even in lingerie ads. He'd gag, throw up inside his mouth seeing scantily clad, overweight pop singers, like Lizzo, wobbling their lardy asses on television. And he'd scratch his head as fat chicks, somehow, were proclaimed by the Western mainstream media as being "brave" for flaunting their flabby figures.

To him, there was nothing brave or sexy about a woman being a fatty. Nothing worth celebrating. To the tourist, fat chicks were just plain gross…

Back in the West, the tourist would miss the gentle, thin Asian girly girls, with their absurdly long painted nails, fake lashes, heaps of makeup and luscious lips always stretched into smiles. Their feminine, form-fitting clothes and shiny hair. Their super tight, tiny pussies and the certain silkiness, reactivity of their sugary skin. Eventually he gave up on dating local women and abandoned any idea of "settling down" in his native land and its icy, gloomy environs.

Thailand, his once, twice, or thrice-yearly trips to the "Land of Smiles," were all he needed.

So it was natural for the tourist to decide to retire in Thailand. Once he hit retirement age, he decided to leave his home country, straightaway, for good, and he hopped the next plane bound for Southeast Asia.

The tourist rented a small but sunny, furnished apartment in downtown Bangkok, near Sukhumvit Road. It was his little chamber in paradise. And next to his new apartment was a massage shop, where he'd go, nearly every day, for a foot massage or Thai massage. One thing he absolutely loved about Thailand was its availability of affordable massages. Only 8 dollars for an hour of foot massage. With his body sore from age, the daily massages worked wonders.

Not to mention Thailand's tropical weather, humidity helped loosen his joints, alleviated his worsening arthritis. It was paradise, truly paradise, and for the first month, he'd felt like a new man. He'd felt young again and on top of the world. He was living the dream, drinking cold beer, every day, eating spicy food, popping dick pills, and boning bar girls half his age. It was his perfect life…

At the massage shop next to his place, he soon discovered one of the most beautiful girls he'd ever seen. A moon among stars. She had a face that was shockingly beautiful. Beautiful enough to shake mountains. And she was svelte, petite, and honey-skinned, with shiny, raven-black hair falling just past her shoulders. She wore heavy helpings of makeup, too, which he liked, and her ludicrously long fake lashes, sparkly pink eye shadows over her upcurved eyes were just… so mesmerizing… that every time he gazed upon her… he felt light-headed in love…

Even the dim lighting of the massage parlor reflected, like shimmering stars, off her figure, and simply seeing her brought a smile to his face.

Her English seemed minimal, though. As was his Thai, despite his visiting the country for over two decades. Although it was on his to-do list, he'd not gotten around to taking a Thai language study course. The vowels, and the tones, in particular, felt nearly impossible for him. Not to mention the indecipherable script of its alphabet.

Plus, most everyone in Thailand, in Bangkok, touristy spots, spoke "Tourist", a pidgin dialect of hand signals, body language, and Thai-accented English words, and he found himself speaking more and more in the pidgin syntax and frequently

noticed himself saying English loan words in that same Thai fashion, always stressing the final syllable, like com-pu-TUH, et cetera.

However, now that he was living in Thailand, now that he was retired, perhaps he would do the Thai language course, he thought, envisioning chatting up the massage girl. Maybe being able to communicate with a goddess as pretty as her was all the motivation he needed. It's not like he didn't have the time. Time, finally, it seemed, was on his side.

๖

That massage shop girl soon came to occupy his mind. She'd flit through his thoughts and even appear in his dreams. She'd replaced the menacing veiled figures, and since settling in Thailand, the aggrieved voices had all but disappeared, become as distant as waves upon a faraway shore.

The massage girl… She'd set his mind in motion, lit a fire in his heart, and he'd daydream about her, then think of her at night before sinking into sleep, replaying comforting mental montages, vivid images of them, together, hand-in-hand, strolling along on an island in the Andaman Sea. Cerulean waters foaming onto a white sandy shore… The two of them sipping coconuts and spooning in a swinging hammock strung between two tall palm trees…

The tourist wished to find out everything about her. Although she was practically young enough to be his daughter, or granddaughter, maybe… Still, she fascinated him. He'd fallen completely under her spell. She was just so beautiful, had a smile that he'd sell his soul for and a perfect, well-rounded hourglass figure, the type of body so perfect it looked photoshopped.

Better yet, unlike many of the local women, she wasn't a whore, either. She wasn't turning tricks, hadn't been fucked by hundreds of baboon ass baldie fatsos and losers like the old man buns, that old man mullet shitbird, and their slovenly ilk.

With her silky, coy demeanor, she really did seem like a nice Buddhist girl, and she didn't appear to have any ulterior motives, the tourist thought… Maybe she wouldn't be an agist, annoying, entitled bitch like so many of the women back home, either...

The tourist made up his mind and planned to ask her out. He watched a couple of videos on YouTube, watched *Learn Thai with Mod*, and learned a handful of Thai phrases for dating. He was ready. He was READY! He was going to have his own little exotic beauty, his own little perfect china doll. It was all coming together…

Finally, on a muggy Friday afternoon, he did it. Sitting back in his big comfy recliner, the foot massage chair, he twisted his lips into a big Thai smile, and told his dream girl that she "should find a husband."

Then he asked her, confidently, in a mix of broken Thai and English, if he could buy her dinner.

She only smiled and giggled, didn't say yes or no. When he reiterated his offer, she again giggled, and mentioned something about "working." Which he took as a no.

Then she asked him, in broken English, if he had any pictures from when he was young, if he could show her his "young man" pictures.

A chill plaited up his spine. His eyes narrowed. His body hair rose, prickled like a hedgehog… Then a sickness stirred, and formed, like a clenched fist, in his stomach.

So this was it. To her, he was just another old man, just another customer, nothing more... His heartbeat then began to race, his breaths shortened, and his mouth turned dry as sand…

But, only kindling his consternation, the tourist's dream girl wasn't sensing any of his internal anguish. She just kept smiling, asked again if he had pictures of himself, when he was "her age."

"I think you was han'sum man," she said, smiling wider, and giggling once more, profiting in his grief. Then she whispered something in Thai and snickered with a nearby masseuse, another young Thai girl, who was busily rubbing at the feet of a

sleeping middle-aged Japanese businessman, and the two masseuses shared a fit of suppressed laughter.

Pressing his eyes shut tightly, the tourist's sickness inside grew, spread across his chest. It stung. It festered. His life, everything was feeling like a lie. Everything. All the smiles. It was all a fraud. A FRAUD!

He'd known these ugly thoughts. He knew the voices. The cockroach voices in his mind's walls. The infestation in his subconscious. But now, now though, they were impossible to suppress, and the cockroaches were crawling from their cracks, and attacking, like phantoms in a horror flick.

The phantom voices were rampaging, pouring in like hordes of starving rats. The voices telling him he was nothing. Not even a human. He was only his money. That he was a walking ATM. That he was no better than any of the others that he'd mocked.

The reckoning then settled in. It was a dark, cold and hollow feeling that hardened and formed into a shard of broken glass. It pressed to his throat. The tourist then knew… There'd always be… a void… The voices, a fucking football stadium of the aggrieved, appeared and rose, all standing, all screaming at him. And hovering above, high as an angel, the tourist could see a veiled figure pointing and falling backward laughing.

A clucking rage filled the tourist. His eyes opened slowly, like sliding elevator doors. He then glared at the smiling young girl, jerked back his feet from the stool, stepped out of his big comfy pleather massage chair and rose, as a grim champion, to his feet, and sneered.

The girl, appearing confused, threw her head back and asked, "Is, okay?"

The tourist didn't answer. Instead, he kicked the girl in her face. Drilled her with a dropkick to her chin, launching her backward, sending the small girl tumbling, collapsing to the floor, landing with a crash. Lying crumpled on the floor, the girl unloosed a shrill whine, then began whimpering like a beaten dog.

Then the tourist, his marbled legs still beaded with rose-scented oil, stormed straight out of the massage parlor's front door, and began marching, barefoot, toward the golden glaze of the sun.

BESTIALITY BRO AT THE ONSEN SPA IN TOKYO

飛行機 1

“Godzilla versus a trojan horse hiding ten thousand sumo wrestlers. Who ya got?” Our Regional Coordinator blurted out at the team. Whether his words were lost to jetlag or just plain disinterest, his mythical matchup went unexamined as the team yawned, unclicked seatbelts, and mechanically collected belongings from our seatbacks and overhead compartments.

This was my first visit to Japan. And I was beginning to feel overcome. Drunk on jetlag, and with the effects of the 500mg THC edible wearing off, everything was seeming so surreal. I suddenly started to experience a certain sensation, a

feeling… Something like I was in a sci-fi movie. Or as if I'd traveled forward in time…

Everything around me, everything in the airport, the city, the taxi, the hotel, et cetera… everything… looked so futuristic. Everything was so clean and sparkly and high-tech and automated. And everything spoke. Inanimate objects burst into cute, computerized coos. Doors spoke. Escalators and elevators spoke. Even the Tokyo toilets were automated and spoke. And, incredibly, the Tokyo toilets could even wash and dry genitals at the push of a button.

But rather than grim or dystopian, as the technology of the future is often portrayed, I found the automation and its futurism warming, comical in a sense. Think *Jetsons* rather than *1984*…

ホテル 2.1

While checking in to the hotel, Our Regional Coordinator, a real road warrior, expertly gauged the mood of the team. He saw the low energy. The lack of pep. He knew that following our red-eye, trans-pacific flight, the team required rejuvenation before the gauntlet of conferences kicked off. He knew that once the bugle sounded, and the events began, we'd be off running like a pack of greyhounds chasing a rabbit.

And so Our Regional Coordinator clapped his hands, like a football coach on the sidelines, and rah-rahed, fired up the team. Then he suggested we book (fully expensed to Corporate, of course) a day-pass to our Hyatt's Onsen Spa.

Perfunctorily we agreed. But, later, I was quite pleased that we followed his suggestion, as the spa far exceeded any of my expectations…

ホテル 2.2

The spa was simply the epitome of luxury. Located on the Hyatt's 102nd floor, the spa's lobby featured sweeping views of the Tokyo megalopolis. Walking in, I felt at ease as I drew in a deep breath, becoming delightfully awash in a rich potpourri of sandalwood fragrances.

Flicking my gaze at a wall of floor-to-ceiling windows, I saw out to infinite rows of Tokyo's skyscrapers, superstructures. To me, even Tokyo's buildings appeared futuristic, with skyscrapers that looked like robots. Superstructures that looked

like spaceships. I really was starting to feel as if I'd stepped into a sci-fi film, or that our airplane actually was a time machine…

Our Regional Coordinator mentioned something in passing about how the spa has hot spring pools and that hot springs and the sauna are both "tremendous for the circulation." Then he went on about how in Japan there's a vending machine for everything, that you can buy beer from a vending machine and how much he appreciated that…

I was finding that the spa had very particular rules about shoes, slippers, and feet. Upon checking in, we had to stick our shoes inside a shoebox-sized shoe locker in the lobby. Then we were given slippers that we were to wear in most areas but were forbidden to wear in other areas. The shoe etiquette, shoe rules seemed confusing, at first, but I began to quickly appreciate the cleanliness, the ritual of it…

Our team proceeded past the shoe lockers and marched single file toward the spa's men's locker room. On the way, we passed a pair of spa attendants. Two CoverGirl beautiful, heavily made-up Japanese women in kimonos. The attendants robotically smiling and bowing.

Then I briefly considered that there could be robots everywhere. Those skyscrapers, buildings could truly be Transformers or UFOs... And all the spa's attendants could really be robots, androids, or cyborgs, or something similarly scary. And while these revelations made me uncomfortable in a way, I determined that even if the spa attendants were robots, even surreptitiously robots, I would respect that.

Our Regional Coordinator, the type to turn any steering wheel or table into a drum set, turned his big red tomato of a head, split into a smile and suggested:

"We oughta take in a baseball game while we're here. Japanese baseball, I'm telling you, the atmosphere, you never seen anything like it…"

"The sushi, too..."

"You eat the sushi here in Japan, though, believe me, and you'll have a tough time eating sushi anywhere else. There's no going back."

ホテル 2.3

Throughout the spa's various chambers were starry night ceilings, blond-wood walls, marble flooring, and a series of hot and cool pools.

Each of the pools was a rectangle about as tall as a sedan, about as long as a limo, and each pool was about four feet deep with water said to be directly sourced from thermal springs. Digital monitors carefully displayed each pool's water temperature. The monitors' numbers occasionally shifting up or down a few pips, like a stock ticker on a slow day.

Aluminum signs were affixed by each pool too. The signs stating, in multiple languages, the water's mineral content, as well as explaining how the waters help detoxify, heal, and relax the body.

ホテル 2.4

Entering some strange place between somnolent and invigorated, I padded forward, swinging my gaze side-to-side like a real sightseer. I made mental notes, impressed at the spa's array of other amenities, including Himalayan hot stone-bed baths, Akasuri Body Scrubs, mud wraps, facials, massages, cool-down rooms, as well as an organic smoothie and snack bar... I was even tempted to check out of my upscale yet closet-sized hotel room and simply stay in the spa. It was that nice…

ロボット 3

The spa was well-staffed with a small army of robotic attendants berobed in traditional Japanese clothing.

To a person, the staff parted, stopped and bowed wherever, whenever we passed. They all looked young, too, the staff. Maybe early 20ish. When seeing us, the clientele, they'd bow and instantly screw their faces into ear-to-ear smiles. Lottery-winner smiles. Smiles that'd make a dentist proud.

The smiling, the bowing was a pleasant change from the normal NYC idea of customer service. Those surly shop assistants, cashiers who either have a thousand-yard stare or appear as if they might physically assault you at any given moment…

However, the spa staff's smiles, in a way, looked abrading and painful. As if the smiles had a life and mind of their own. As if the smiles might eventually turn, attack and eat the attendants' faces, like an enraged pet.

Otherwise, the staff generally had a certain glazed look to them, an expression between nonplussed and indifferent. Stoic yet icy. Almost as if preparing for a driver's license photo. That sort of absently present expression. There but not there.

うんこ 4

The team disrobed. Stuck our stuff in our lockers. Then we showered. Washed off the sticky grime of the 14-hour flight. I found that there was nothing to cleanse the soul like a piping hot shower after a long flight. And the moans of pleasure uttered by my teammates in adjacent shower stalls seemed to constitute a certain consensus.

Then the team toweled off, tread forward, to the pools. We rinsed ourselves off via wooden ladle, from a wooden basin, with what was purportedly pure mountain water. The water was cool to the touch and tingly, giving me goosebumps as it splashed and cascaded over my travel-weary body.

Then we sat and soaked in the "soda bath" pool. The soda bath's waters were refreshing. And hot. 41.2C according to the digital monitor. Aptly named as well, the soda bath's waters were blurry as vanilla cream soda, nearly the color of skim milk. The unique coloration lending me a feeling more like I was climbing into a bowl of hot plain yogurt rather than a pool…

Our Regional Coordinator, with tendrils of the soda bath's steam framing his fat red face, suddenly pulled his piehole into a frown, and started shaking his head, recounting a recent ordeal:

"It was earlier in Q2. When we had several branches' computers increasingly monitored by Corporate. You know, cutting back on assholes wasting worktime on social media. Jerkoffs going on Reddit or Twitter. Playing Angry Birds, that type of shit…"

“And, like, Jesus, the shit this one guy was looking at. It got flagged, instantly. And understandably. It was… beyond gruesome… Like, snuff films… Bestiality, dogs... Necrophilia…”

As he spoke, Our Regional Coordinator’s ketchup-colored helmet of hair seemed to be thinning. The skin on his neck starting to sag like a turkey’s. Heavy shadows hung under his eyes and his face reddened. His head, seemingly, started growing larger too, as he spoke, like a balloon filling with air. Like many Irish, Irish Americans, the man’s face had been appearing redder, his head getting bigger as he aged anyway. But this sudden burst of rage definitely did appear to be hastening the process.

Our Regional Coordinator paused and stared blankly as if in a brief trance. Then he mumbled something unintelligible and went on:

“Nah, there wasn’t kiddie porn or anything. But the stuff he was looking at… I saw the screenshots. I even watched him scrolling it. Live. I was watching him on his computer, watching his monitor, like I was God above. Ah, it was insane. This freak streaming videos, looking at photos, of… the most heinous, most traumatic shit…”

“… Imagine being a Facebook Content Moderator. Imagine having to do that for a living. Looking at those videos, those images all day. Seeing animal cruelty, sexual attacks… Like that’s all you do. You look at that. 5, 6 days a week, 8 hours a day. Watching the worst of humanity… Having to see that content, every single day. That is so brutal.”

“Bro, no one doing that job is walking away with all their marbles…”

“Bad enough sitting for 8 hours, watching the stuff that does get past the censors.”

“I can see why Reddit dumps those duties on volunteer mods.”

“Was Bestiality Bro on Reddit?”

Our Regional Coordinator didn’t reply to that. Instead, he snorted, then cupped and splashed hot soda bath water on his face. Then he lightly palm-slapped his right cheek with his right hand, then lightly palm-slapped his left cheek with his left hand. Then he went on, words falling from his lips:

“So, of course, I brought ‘Bestiality Bro’ up to Corporate…”

“Yeah, and, like, get this. They told me his office wasn’t profitable anyway, had been shitting the bed for the last five fiscal quarters.”

“Amber Alert.”

“I heard that.”

“Oh, oh no, I used to think of her when I…”

Our Regional Coordinator appeared neither amused nor annoyed at the team’s puns and idiocy. Then he continued:

“So Corporate claims they were planning to liquidate the whole division. I was to be notified in the next couple of weeks, blah blah blah. Corporate even said the sick crap this freak was looking at… that, like, since it isn’t technically illegal, at least not in New York, it itself is not grounds for termination. Only a warning. A fucking warning…”

“I mean, like, what if a client or an investor visits the branch? And they walk by this freak’s cubicle and see him laughing and spanking it to a necrophilia video? The fuck happens then? Another ‘warning?’ The fuck outta here…”

Our Regional Coordinator squinted and unloosed a low-key belch.

“I’d be concerned about any investor who wasn’t concerned…”

悲しい 5.1

A particularly grim-faced spa attendant walked by, pushing a mop that looked like a giant squeegee. His seemed like one of the lowliest duties a spa attendant might have. Only a leg up, on the spa attendant hierarchy, from scrubbing the robot toilets. And going by the attendant’s dour countenance, he appeared acutely aware of this.

悲しい 5.2

Soaking in the scenery, through a wedge in the steamy miasma, I spotted a large warning sign, and it commanded my attention.

Not that a warning sign in Japan was unusual. I'd come to discover that Japan has a myriad of warning signs. In practically every place imaginable. The signs usually featuring cute cartoon characters. I pondered that perhaps such ubiquitous signage was preemptive. A way for the Japanese to seize back control over their inhospitable, volcanic land. Being in the Ring of Fire, having earthquakes, volcanos, and tsunamis… Godzilla attacks… Such a precarious geographical position must pester the psyche, make one wish to slap warning signs everywhere… I can understand…

But the warning sign commanding my attention contained no cartoon characters. It was rectangular and matter of fact. In several languages, in bold, red and black font, it stated that "Inappropriate behavior will not be permitted and is grounds for permanent banishment from the premises."

Our Regional Coordinator stopped speaking until the grim-faced attendant passed us and was out of earshot. And this was understandable, considering the topic of conversation. Our openly talking about bestiality, necrophilia, Amber Heard and snuff videos could be considered inappropriate behavior, possibly.

会社 6

Our Regional Coordinator popped his neck, tilting it to each side. Then he cracked his knuckles so loudly that I thought he might have broken his fingers. Then his eyes caught fire and he went on:

"But it gets worse. Corporate orders me to drive up there. Fucking 400 miles. Six and a half fucking hours. Had my ass trucking it all the way up to fucking downtown Buffalo."

"Fucking Buffalo…"

"Then Corporate, saving costs, stuck me in the shittiest hotel. I mean, it had a decent exterior but paper-thin walls. I swear, I could hear a couple in the next room doing the nasty for like almost an hour. The lady just wailing... Uh… It was horrific… I'm telling you…"

"Like, I had headphones, but still. It's the principle."

"I don't think there's any worse sound. No worse sound than listening to total strangers fuck in the next room…"

“Anyways, I had to go, in person, and talk to this sick fuck, sit with him face to face. Corporate saying how the ‘notice of the division’s closure needs to be delivered in person, by upper management,’ blah blah blah, and ‘that I must conduct their exit interviews, file paperwork…’”

Our Regional Coordinator had begun doing air quotes to emphasize his displeasure.

“Don’t bullshit me. Okay. For fuck’s sake, I know it’s to avoid these bastards bitching and moaning on the internet, or a scumbag lawyer, an ambulance-chasing shit-stain, some asshole with a ponytail, coming after us, fucking suing us...”

“I’m thinking it probably won’t be the necrophilia dog dude taking any legal actions. That would be an easy lawsuit to quash…”

“Yo, Bestiality Bro should work for Datadog or SurveyMonkey next.”

“But definitely not Pets.com, if that still exists.”

“Okay. I’m gonna say it right now. I blame Bestiality Bro for the recurrence of the monkeypox virus.”

Our Regional Coordinator’s grimace remained intact, his head starting to look bigger than a basketball.

“Look, it’s part of the job. I know. Yeah, yeah. Wah wah, crybaby, yeah, yeah, fuck you...”

“But it was one of the creepiest experiences... Sitting in a glass-walled conference room, one to one, with this freak. This fucking potential mass killer. This animal who’s into the most repulsive shit. I’m telling you. I’d basically been looking inside his head. I had visited the darkest corners of this asshole’s mind…”

“And not that I care about others’ porn preferences, what they watch. But… Er… I’d rather not know, right... And not that I’m trying to be a sanctimonious, moralistic prick, or whatever, but it’s just… I’d seen into this freak’s psyche… I’d seen his worst… His worst, most deviant impulses. I mean, who the fuck… Who the fuck wants to watch, like every day, videos, even real videos… Of horses… One

video even had three Burmese dickheads taking on a monitor lizard… A fucking lizard… A lizard almost the size of a alligator… I'm telling you…"

"I didn't know it was possible to… with… a lizard..."

"It's cold-blooded too, a lizard, right? It must be freezing up in that…"

"But was the monitor lizard a member of the Illuminati, or the British Royal Family?"

" … "

"Did we ever see him? Was Bestiality Bro ever at any of the upstate conferences?"

"Nope, his department never attended. You never saw him, I don't think…"

"I can't believe he wasn't instantly canned."

"Corporate should have lashed his ass like they do in Malaysia and Singapore…. Trafficking those websites, and on company time? What a fucking piece of shit."

"Yo, for real, Malaysians definitely don't play that shit."

"It's about principles."

"…"

"… Corporate could turn on his webcam or anyone's in that office, too. Corporate has a whole surveillance center. A bunker built. It's like the NSA in there."

"They must have our offices' desktops on that, too, right?"

"Looks like someone might be receiving a 'warning'…"

Our Regional Coordinator sat silent for a beat and didn't confirm or deny that Corporate was watching us or flipping on our webcams. Then the big red mass of anxiety grunted and continued:

"But yeah. This sick fuck looked nerdy as shit in his company picture. And he was in real life too."

"He was a smarmy son-of-a-bitch. The pencil-neck, beta-male type. Scrawny too. Arms like garden hoses. The schmo probably never lifted weights in his life. And he was short, quite short, like 5'5. Probably wasn't more than 120 pounds. And he

was wearing these huge eyeglasses, like the size'a coffee mugs, these things. And his pants were kinda tight and riding up and there's… ankles, shins showing…"

"Shins showing?"

"Shins. And Ankles… Both…"

"An Urkel. If Urkel was a sick and depraved fuck…"

"A what?"

"Forget about it. You're too young for Urkel. And that's probably for the best."

男根 7

A middle-aged Asian man with a wet combover strode by the soda bath. He was completely nude, as were all the patrons in the pool, sauna areas. The attendants, however, were clothed and stood out, conspicuous in their blue and black robes…

In the pool areas, saunas, nudity was mandatory. No bath towels were allowed in either. Only a small white towel was allowed with you. The towel only slightly larger than a washcloth…

Red-Eye Randy, a real meathead, threw out a non-sequitur:

"Why are there easy breast implants, but nothing similar, no easy penis enlargement operations?"

"I bet the Illuminati, lizard people already have that. Special dick operations. But they don't want the commoners to have them. They know dumbasses would go crazy. Idiots walking around with a third leg, literally. There'd be motherfuckers with dicks the size of NBA basketball players' legs and shit. Fire hose length dicks…"

"It's only a matter of time. Wait 'til you see the penises of the future…"

"They'll be cyborg penises. Retractable, detachable penises with smart functions."

"The 'Internet of Things.'"

"I betcha they already have smart penises in Japan."

"No way, bro. I'm not getting a smart penis. Imagine hackers getting their hands on that..."

Nude male bodies, Japanese, save for an occasional honkey, went roaming the pools' premises. The bodies moving languorously, as soft mood music chimed, waters gushed, and an adjacent whirlpool burbled and bubbled like a boiling pot on the stove.

A waft of eucalyptus oil then simmered over from a sauna nearby, and I sniffed in the fragrance, reinvigorated by it, briefly feeling as if I'd snorted a thick line of cocaine. Then a cool rush of calm overtook me. I was finding a certain serenity to the place. A natural, mothering warmth that I was beginning to appreciate.

エイリアン 8

Our Regional Coordinator's ears perked up as he caught wind of the eucalyptus oil. Then he snorted several times in a row, his big red Irish head becoming almost as big as a beachball. Then he continued:

"So I'm sitting across from this freak. I'm across this long mahogany table. And I'm having to ask all these standard exit interview questions. And I'm pretending to care. But all I can think about was the shit he was looking at. Why he'd even want to see that… I'm telling you… It's the only thing I wanted to ask him about…"

"And I'm wondering just who the fuck this guy really is… Like maybe he's got an apartment like Jeffrey Dahmer, with cut-up bodies in the fridge."

"Eh, some people just like the macabre. Not everyone watching horror flicks is a chainsaw-wielding maniac. Not everyone watching action movies shoots people."

"And not everyone watching porn goes running outside with a rock-hard cock, mounting randos like a wild baboon."

"Yo, I'd do that if I could. I'd go run outside, go running the streets, rock-hard cock in hand. For real. I'd go run up on and fuck a perfect stranger. As long as they were cool with it, of course. And attractive enough. And of legal age."

"That'd be an interesting situation to get carded, asked for ID…"

"Bro, real talk, I just hope my mortician isn't into necrophilia videos. That's all I ask…"

Our Regional Coordinator didn't say any more. He shook his head, grimaced again and rose from the soda bath.

“Let’s hit the sauna. It’s allegedly got Himalayan Sea salts. Supposed to improve circulation. Or some shit.”

“The Himalayas have a sea?”

“I think it’s underground, that sea.”

“The Himalayas, isn’t that where the Loch Ness Monster lives?”

“I’m not sure.”

“The Himalayan salts are supposed to be legit excellent at improving circulation. I read that on a blog, I think, somewhere…”

“What exactly is circulation?”

“Circulation is circulation.”

“Well. That’s that settled.”

“Himalayan Sea salts are why the Loch Ness Monster has lived so long. The Loch Ness Monster eats Himalayan Sea salts. Every fucking day.”

“The Loch Ness Monster must have phenomenal circulation.”

“Nah, bro. Fuck that. The Loch Ness Monster watches necrophilia videos at work.”

“And Godzilla watches bestiality videos.”

“Nah, but wait. Is it actually bestiality to Godzilla, since Godzilla is an animal too? I’d assert that Godzilla has a right.”

“That prospect of Godzilla, or the Loch Ness Monster, bro. It makes me glad the dinosaurs are dead. Yo, fuck those prehistoric motherfuckers. Like lizards the size of a building. Fuck that. Think about a brontosaurus stomping through your city. We’re way better off without that threat.”

We then rose, in unison, followed Our Regional Coordinator’s lead.

We kept our heads down, our eyes tracking the floor. Not a peel of eye contact as we stepped from the soda bath. Padding our way to the sauna, we passed several nude Japanese men in various states of silent soaking and bathing. To a man, the Japanese looked so stoic. So unshakable. Unlike us, meatheads, Yankees… anxiety-ridden, red-faced, honkey business fucks…

"I'm telling you. This is why the Japanese live so long. They eat sushi, and they do the sauna…"

"It's the circulation… That's the key… It's the circulation…"

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF XI JINPING

7:00 AM: Xi Jinping awakens to an erhu alarm, Huawei preset from Moon Audio Opulence surround sound speakers in his palatial, 1000 sq. meter bedroom.

His bedroom's dome vaulted ceilings are 40 m high, painted revolutionary red, and the bedroom's verdant green floor tiles are cut from solid jade.

His emperor size bed is 20 m wide, 10 m long and carved from a mix of ivory, Cartier diamond and pure, 24k Harry Winston gold.

His scruffy bedhead rests on panda bear skin, ostrich feather stuffed, Van der Hilst pillows, and he rubs his eyes and yawns into consciousness.

The bedsheets are Super Soft Fuzzy China silk, tailor made by Chanel, and his blanket a Chanasya Super Soft Long Shaggy Chic Fuzzy with Fluffy Sherpa (and micro mink)…

The bed's Kluft mattress is made from blue whale and black rhino bone, and is filled with feathers of extinct, rare bird species only known to specific scientists.

7:05 AM: His cavalcade of PLA servants march in single file, enter his room, serve Xi breakfast in bed, presented on sparklingly shiny fine .999 silver tray, with .999 silver spoons and .999 silver chopsticks…

Breakfast is always the same: black truffle porridge, 8 fried dough-sticks, a tea-boiled egg, sliced dragon fruit and bananas, opal crystal glass of soymilk, and Qing Dynasty porcelain cup of Da Hong Pao tea (lightly mixed with sugarcane juice and crushed, dried tiger penis powder).

(Xi Jinping, being an active, practicing, secret society illuminati lizard man/anal vampire, is given a daily injection of blood, rectally; a PLA scientist administering the enema from a hose attached from a wheeled slushie-like roto-machine, slipping the lubed hose in Xi's anus, jetting up Xi's anal cavity an enema of blood plasma; a plasma concocted, designed, by top Chinese scientists; its mixture-blood from tiger cubs, Cambodian and Uyghur bred/selected children…)

After his morning enema, whilst eating breakfast, Xi clicks on his Stuart Hughes Prestige HD Supreme Edition, 188 inch TV, watches CCTV News, CCTV5 Sports, and occasionally hate-watches Taiwan news channels, shaking with anger at Cai Yingwen's face, hacking/spitting at the TV screen, and plots schemes to massacre bandits in Hong Kong, those picking quarrels…

Xi Jinping sleeps alone these days. His wife, Peng, complaining of his flatulence, sleeps in an adjacent 1000 sq. meter bedroom.

8:00 AM: By this time Xi Jinping has eaten his breakfast, smoked a Panda cigarette or two and listened, on Huawei smart speaker, to his secretary's morning "en en en, blah, blah, blah" briefing.

He'll press a button and have his personal grooming team brush his teeth with Theodent 300 toothpaste, shave his face w/the Zafirro razor, a $100,000 shaver with an iridium handle and sapphire blades.

Afterwards, his wardrobe team enters. After shedding his panda fur bathrobe, Xi Jinping slips on his iKingsky Men's Sexy Low-Rise T-Back Thong Underwear.

His tailors, wardrobe consultants take constant measurements and adjustments due to his ever-expanding waistline; once appropriate figures are gathered, he'll be fitted into a Brioni Vanquish II three-piece suit.

Due to incontinence, he'll be also fitted with a Tranquility Elite adult vacuum seal diaper (to avoid another incident like with the Prime Minister of Kyrgyzstan.)

It's about this time the first of his various bowel movements occur. Throughout his many sprawling mansions, he has had installed Hang Fung Golden electronic throne toilets that cleanse, air dry, and massage his anus, utilizing the latest in 5G Huawei technology/quantum physics…

Whilst on the toilet he reads the People's Daily Sports Section, reviews/crosses names off his enemies list, and hate-reads the New York Times.

(His toilet is also equipped with a special robotic prostate massage function which he finds pleasurable and enjoys from time to time, especially after his regular bouts of diarrhea.)

9:00 AM: Disciplined cadres, those without face, carry Xi by Buccellati golden palanquin down the marble hallways, lead him to the meeting hall; the room consisting of a mahogany seat/roundtable, folding seat outer circles (chairs constructed from dissidents' bones, and the rooms' walls painted red from the blood of executed prisoners, Falun Gong.)

In the meeting halls, the AC is purposely never set. It's kept either miserably hot or chillingly cold, dependent on weather conditions, upon Xi's command…

The 9 AM will be the first of his many meetings throughout the day. It's always begun by an underling crawling in on all fours, springing to his feet, and reciting a prepared statement, economic statistics, presenting charts, budgets for budgets, and updating the status of various development projects, updating plans for plans about plans and initiatives for the BRI.

The underling is occasionally lashed via bullwhip by a higher-ranking cadre or forced to lick the bare feet, chew foot fungus of superiors.

When economic, pollution numbers are especially disappointing, underlings, and at times all cadres must in unison bow, drink fresh heritage pig blood…

Aside from the unbridled joy of humiliating the underling, Jinping rarely pays much attention during meetings, and zones out, thinking of UEFA Champions League, his asset portfolio, his mistresses, or what he might eat for lunch.

However, if something does spark his interest, he'll interrupt and, at times angrily, speak his mind, or castigate a comrade, slap or zap cadres with an electric mosquito swatter.

If, in the chance Xi speaks, the room is dead silent.

(One time a feisty cadre from Ningxia made the mistake of unharmoniously talking over Xi Jinping. That cadre has not been heard from since. Rumor has him

inspecting air quality, monitoring coal refuse in Shijiazhuang. Although the blogger who posted that rumor to Weibo has, himself, disappeared, so it's impossible to verify…)

Morning meetings range in time from 2 to 3 hours.

12 PM: Lunch time. Xi Jinping and his inner circle are ferried by Van Cleef Arpels golden golf carts to a spectacular dining hall with impossibly high, 100 m, immaculately painted, vaulted ceilings; the halls' walls with Wang Xizhi calligraphy and renderings of Mount Penglai, Eight Pillars; dragons, tigers, ox, rabbit; Great Wall frescoes; hammer and sickle flags hanging in perfectly straight lines, every 8 meters.

His inner circle, men around his age, mostly with wealth-bellies, jet black comb-overs and always in matching white collared buttoned-down shirts and well-ironed black slacks, sit around a circular table, smoking Panda cigarettes.

The Lazy Susan slowly spins, is circled with piping hot trays of pork steamed buns, steamed pork dumplings, fried pork dumplings, handmade noodles, fried chicken, sweet/sour chicken, sweet/sour fish, fried pork, minced pork, fried beef, fried, pickled vegetables, and heaping bowls of steamed rice.

Xi Jinping waits for everyone else to begin before taking the first bite.

During lunch, not much is said, except for brief talks of future diplomatic visits, market fluctuations, European football matches, Olympics updates, and future Party gatherings.

Xi Jinping usually doesn't speak, just sits and smokes Treasurer or New Century cigarettes, nods and voices an occasional "eng…" to demonstrate comprehension or agreement…

Following lunch, Xi Jinping is brought by palanquin back to his bedroom for his 2-hour afternoon nap.

He again awakes to his erhu alarm, smokes a Panda cigarette, pushes a call-button and receives his daily foot and neck massage from a young female servant or two.

3 PM to 5:30 PM: Another meeting or three. Perhaps a visit from a foreign dignitary seeking investment.

Sometimes a visit to a random city or remote village, where, flanked by bodyguards, he'll speak with the proletariat, many a villager in hysterics, weeping, and sometimes a village elder, smiling toothlessly with his whole face, clutching to Xi's arm, and then Xi will recite to them a prepared statement, stating how unworthy he is of their devotion to the Chinese Nation, Party and the Socialist cause…

Cigarettes are strictly prohibited during State visits or village visit, except off camera or in bathrooms…

5:30 PM: Dinner with his wife, the inner circle and their wives.

Dinner is often the same fare as lunch, though is heavy on exported version of Tsingtao beer, bottles and bottles of Maotai, various baijiu, heavier on cigarettes.

After dinner, Xi Jinping and his wife have their evening stroll around the compound.

She'll dictate policy to him in contorted faces and sometimes they'll argue, and she'll smack him in the ear, or he slaps her upside the head, and they'll push and shove, need to be separated by security.

After their walk, Peng goes for her square-dancing and Xi Jinping is brought by palanquin to the sauna.

Xi Jinping sits in the Russian sauna for 20 minutes or so, and is wheeled out, on a rolling table, and scrubbed down, table-bathed and massaged by a young female masseuse, with whom he'll now and then fornicate or perform other sexual activities (particularly that of prostate massage milking).

Following this, he's wheeled into a massive Persian style shower room, hand-washed by two or three young female servants, dried, smeared from head to toe in tiger balm, fitted into a tailored red Mulberry silk imperial robe, and driven back by golden golf cart to his master bedroom, so he can retire for the evening.

9 PM: Xi Jinping is in bed, snacking on Harðfiskur dried fish, chain smoking Pandas, drinking Da Hong Pao tea and will nod off while clicking between CCTV, American gangster TV, movies, and Bloomberg TV.

11 PM: A servant enters his quarters, tucks him into his covers, fits him with a Tranquility Elite adult diaper to prevent bedwetting and turns off the TV and lights.

A WEREWOLF IN BURMA

Circa 2017

The werewolf reeks of booze. He speaks in rapid clips of American English. But with a Glasgow accent. This hairy beast has been with me since the start of the plane ride and claims he used to work as a roadie for the band Cradle of Filth.

“A bottle of Burmese whisky is only $3… Quality batches too… Washes out the parasites and perfectly pairs with tea leaf salads…” says the werewolf, and I crane my neck in bemusement.

The werewolf goes on to tell me he’s been teaching in Myanmar, at a temple, for two years, teaching English to young monks.

“Young monks?” I inquire, surprise coloring my voice. When I think of monks, I think of elderly Asian men with shaved heads… graybeards atop misty mountains… dudes doing Kung Fu in exotic jungle temples and lone silent sinewy figures meditating in the emerald glow of bamboo forests…

Apparently not, though, as the werewolf tells me that impoverished families in Myanmar will sometimes send a child to become a monk, to live in the monastery.

It’s hard for me to picture 5-year-old kids as monks, but I guess it’s a thing.

At the airport, the werewolf accompanies me through a chrome corridor, its walls blasting neon, like Christmas trees. We then proceed to the immigration controls.

Jutting his furry chin toward the sad-eyed agents seated behind the immigration counter, their faces twisted in a type of bored contempt, the werewolf whispers in my ear, his breath hot and wet and stinkin’ of whisky, “These immigration officers, border guards, customs agents… I wonder what they think of tourists, people who can fly around the world, take vacations… Just look at them having to serve us… Like, here they are, probably living in poverty… And here the tourists are, probably packing more in spare change and small bills than that customs agent earns in a month… Sort of explains a certain degree of surliness…”

I wonder what the customs agents will think of the werewolf, but then I size up the nearby knots of UK/Aussie backpackers, the unshaven, hairy lot, one covered

in so many tattoos that barely a speck of his skin shows… And I assume the werewolf will fit right in amongst the Western tourists.

The werewolf and I are launched by psychosomatic slingshot into the city. Then we walk all over Rangoon. We follow the flags. We follow the purple sky and its mango streaks of sunset. We pass progress and songs of the past and we pause our questions, our isms, and we posit nothing.

The werewolf really does fit right in, here in Rangoon. He chews betel nuts like a local, smiles wickedly with his mossy fangs, and skillfully spits big blotchy blood-red gobs of phlegm at the sidewalk.

The sidewalks are a hot mess, too, even without the spit. Dangerous to boot. Thankfully, the werewolf is my guiding light, helps me avert the ordeal of slipping into an open sewer.

Tilting his hairy face and locking eyes with me, the werewolf explains, deadpan, “The sidewalks are simply thin planks of concrete, lids, really, atop open sewers. Parts of the planks have crumbled due to wear, tear, neglect, so it’s best to walk on the edge of the street.”

Looking ahead, I recognize how right he is, pedestrians walking single file, on the side of the road; bustling traffic, chaotic bursts of buses, cars, motorbikes, various three-wheeled vehicles whizzing by; however, the sidewalks sit empty, save for the holes.

The werewolf sighs, then cuts a ferociously loud fart, which he declines to acknowledge, and continues, “Careful at night. Myanmar sells its electricity to China, rations it domestically. Frequent power-cuts leave these streets pitch-black, prone to peril…”

I can imagine how horrible it’d be to fall into an open sewer in Rangoon, that sewer water probably so full of betel nut spit that it’d burn me alive like lava.

I’d never worried about trap doors opening into sewers as I walk down the sidewalk, but I guess it’s a thing.

I stay in a cheap hotel near the temple. The werewolf bunks with me, sleeps on the balcony so he can throw shade at the moon.

Before he retires for the evening, the werewolf asks, rhetorically, “Why is it so many Europeans return to the lands they once colonized? The French in Laos, Vietnam? Brits in Burma? Dutch in Sri Lanka?”

Into the small hours of night, I lie atop the hard, thin mattress, spread out on the single bed, and read Toni Morrison, sip the werewolf’s whisky, and watch the werewolf do drunk yoga on the balcony, catching mosquitoes with his tongue.

I rise early, jolted awake, witnessing the werewolf with his head tossed back and arms outstretched, the werewolf on the balcony bellowing out Beyonce, I think, and I kindly invite him inside.

The werewolf waltzes in, burrows into my backpack, busts out and hands me an exquisite blue and white striped longyi and a Union Jack T-shirt and I ease into the clothes and slather beige sun paint on my face.

Then we drink raw eggs from shot glasses, take turns brushing our teeth with whisky, and clank on our shot glasses with our toothbrushes so as to ward off any evil spirits before we proceed to the temple. As we depart, the werewolf jumps and Kung Fu kicks the hotel’s front door shut, his form perfect as Jackie Chan.

The morning heat, humidity hangs heavy, like a shroud, over Rangoon, and the werewolf drags me, by my legs, down the road. We pass decrepit colonial buildings, glass and steel high-rises, and Chinese shopping malls interspersed among the urban decay of dilapidated structures, motorized street stalls, hovels, tarps, and tin shacks.

Bopping along the street, I people-watch the Burmese. They appear quiet, shy people; they appear curious yet reticent to speak with a foreigner, regardless of language barriers. There’s an abused, downtrodden look to them, a PTSD of sorts, and it’s hard to distinguish their ages…

The werewolf and I flashback to news coverage of Muslim massacres, the "Buddhist Bin Laden" and sinking rafts of boatpeople. But, to my surprise, at least in Rangoon, I spot many Muslims, Muslims in Muslim headscarves and garb, and the Muslims move freely, mingle with Buddhists, and there's a sense of coexistence.

The werewolf starts puffing on a hash pipe. "Fucking media," grumbles the werewolf, smoke misting from his nostrils. "Fucking media only shows the bad stuff. Like Africa, all you hear of is wars, Darfur, Congo, and coup d'états. You'll never hear about people going to a club, going to a birthday party…"

"It's about more than fuel prices," I assert, and I remember watching footage of protests from Rangoon, back in 2007. "The Saffron Revolution," when monks walked miles and miles, barefoot, the monks' feet bleeding as they lumbered through the city streets…

Then a bone-cold spasm shudders up my spine, and I almost want to throw my snakeskin boots into the sewer, in a sign of solidarity… Almost…

The werewolf's arms are like long hairy snakes shooting from his shoulders as he flies a kite made of elephant bones. The bones have been painted crimson, and I'm not sure where or why or how he killed an elephant in the city, constructed an aerial contraption, last night, but I accept it.

We arrive at the Golden Dragon Pagoda and it is extraordinary. Its golden stupa is the size of a small building. It's a triangle of solid gold with a spiraling tip that the werewolf says is an antenna, a beam to Buddha.

"But that much gold, what's to stop someone from hacking off a chunk and running away?" I inquire. The werewolf gasps and scoffs. His stoic silence is practically a form of purgatory.

Slipping off my snakeskin cowboy boots at the entrance of the temple, the werewolf whispers that I need to take off my socks too. In Myanmar, the temples

require visitors to leave both their shoes and socks at the front gate. The werewolf avers that he once saw a Westerner refuse to take off his socks and get chased out of the temple by an angry mob of fist-pumping Buddhists.

Sort of like the "young monks," an angry mob of Buddhists is hard for me to imagine. But I guess it's a thing.

The paved grounds at the temple are baby skin smooth, gray as gravestones and white hot, truly sizzling in the tropical sun. The slick surfaces singe my feet, cooking my flesh, and I feel like I'm trotting on hot coals.

But the werewolf pays it no mind. His feet are hairy but appear tough, hardened. He recounts the time in Mandalay when he climbed a sacred mountain, barefoot. Tragically, however, he divulged that the mountain was littered with plastic bottles, candy bar wrappers, and empty bags of potato chips.

"So, you can't wear shoes, but you can litter and muck up the holy mountain…" I shake my head and lament.

Hard for me to imagine anyone chucking a plastic water bottle into the bushes at a sacred site. But I guess it's a thing.

After taking in the temple, we kick out to the crocodile farm. The werewolf's kite lies in an open sewer, so we book a taxi via telekinesis, and the taxi falls gently from the sky. It's a motorcycle with a sidecar, and its driver is a young ghost, a translucent figure, with bloody bullet-holes for eyes.

"A demonstrator from 1988," claims the werewolf.

"It's always sunny when you're dead."

We jump in the sidecar, and the motorcycle coughs to life, starts with a boom, like a gunshot, and we power forth, surging into a steel sea of traffic.

Initially I'm unnerved, but the ghost driver pilots the motorcycle with the skill of a Hollywood stuntman, and coolly slaloms and swings behind buses, shoots diagonally across lanes, blasts down narrow side streets and alleys, rips and does donuts around roundabouts, navigates the route with ease.

Soon we reach a residential area, by a lake, where there are scores of spacious estates, multi-bedroom houses with stucco roofs, swimming pools, manicured lawns, and classical Chinese style gardens.

The werewolf snorts, points a paw at the stately abodes. “The Tatmadaw. The meth-men. Those are their houses. That’s where the bastard generals live.”

“What would you rather be, a general, a rich man in an autocracy like Burma or Communist China, or a working stiff, clocking 70k a year, in a civilized country?” the werewolf asks me, and I can’t grasp why this is a question.

My skin is slippery with sweat as arrive at the crocodile farm. The farm is a big green square, a gash in the tropical shrubbery. It’s fenced in by a towering protective wall constructed from broken glass, shards of smashed beer bottles.

The farm smells heavy over the humidity, like a soggy mix of shrimp and dirt.

I’d been suspecting the werewolf would want to free the crocodiles. “Crocodiles shouldn’t live in farms,” the werewolf scoffs. “It’s an affront,” he exclaims, biting his claws, leaning to the side of the motorcycle taxi’s sidecar. The werewolf had been sitting on my lap the whole drive over, his fluffy fur tickling at my face.

The young ghost driver slams on the brakes, rocking us forward and backward to a stop. Then he dismounts the bike, bends over, lifts his longyi, and digs out a submachine Uzi from his ass and then turns and aims the weapon at us, demands we flee, and refuses any act of monetary or moral compensation, shouting in broken English that he’s an anarchist and a philanthropist. We get the point and run away.

“See what happens when you don’t have access to social media mobs?” opines the werewolf as we leg it to the farm’s greenish glass gates.

I’d never thought an act of charity could end peacefully at the barrel of a gun. But I guess it’s a thing.

At the crocodile farm, we visit cute little baby crocodiles, and the werewolf holds and hugs one. The baby crocodile has its mouth roped shut; but it's so comfortable with the werewolf that I don't believe it would ever bite him.

After visiting the baby crocodiles, we venture to visit the herd. There's like 66 crocodiles here, in the farm, and they live in a manmade lake, a Florida-shaped peninsula of bleak brown water that has a raised wooden footpath, a long, thin, winding bridge, basically, running through the center of the lake, curving to a right angle and leading up to an observation deck, so that one can literally walk through the crocodiles, and then, literally, look down on them.

But, as soon as we step foot on the bridge and begin to cross through the crocodile lake, we recoil at how rickety the wooden bridge is. Not only is it rickety, but there are also scattered holes the size of suitcases in the bridge. Holes yawning and inviting one to stumble or plunge into the water maybe 15 feet below, ass into the crocodiles' lair.

I'm amazed such a place this dangerous can even exist. I see a few Burmese, in the distance, on the elbow curve of the bridge; they're thin and small and probably know their way about. Since they don't weigh too much, they probably aren't a threat to break through, but then I look at myself and the werewolf. We're both large, hairy mammals. I fear that any instant, we could both fall through this flimsy footbridge.

Then I see more Burmese have entered, are walking toward us, on the path. If we turn back, perhaps we'll overweight the bridge, cause us all to crash through.

So, with no options, we trudge forward. Carefully. We slink around the holes. We avoid peeping down at the crocodiles, and, given his trembling and teeth chattering, it's obvious the werewolf is terrified.

I never thought a werewolf could be scared. But I guess it's a thing.

We arrive, by the grace of Buddha, at the stairs to the observation deck. Initially we're relieved, but then we see that the stairs look perilous and are full of splinters and crooked nails.

The werewolf pauses. I hang my head over my shoulder, nod at him to come forward. But he's frozen. I climb the creaky stairs, and yes, it's unnerving, but I ascend quickly, reach the top and am relieved to discover that the upper observation deck appears more recent and in sturdy condition. There's even an elevator exit.

Looking down to see the werewolf, he lifts his sad, hairy face, shakes his head. His nostrils twitch, his ears flick, and his eyes dart about. Then he turns, runs, and does a cannonball into the lake, landing with a splash, next to a clump of crocodiles. The crocodiles scurry away, appearing far more afraid of the werewolf than the werewolf was of them.

I never thought of crocodiles as fearful creatures. But I guess it's a thing.

SHANGHAIED!!!!

—

I was flying into Shanghai for a business conference and still felt like shit from the giardia I contracted on the last leg of my hiking trip through Nepal.

Not to mention that I was shaken by the turbulent ride over the Himalayas, having watched the snowy peaks of the mountains, like a bed of nails below us, as the plane's cabin violently shook, and passengers screamed.

The plane sliced in through the smog, and several people on board applauded as we touched down safely to Pudong Airport…

After immigration, collecting my bags, I caught a cab and we set off into the bustling Shanghai traffic, and I gazed out at the massive city state, its endless

series of structures that were so alive, all glowing and glimmering, flashing their night colors.

My driver's bouffant hair bobbed in the bumpy ride. He leaned back and asked me directions and I told him I'd never been to Shanghai, didn't know where my hotel was, aside from its name, location on GPS.

He cursed in a local Shanghai dialect that sounded more like Japanese. He looked pissed. It was the first time I'd been asked directions by a cab driver in a foreign country.

The cabbie suddenly pulled over, stopped in the breakdown lane of the highway. Big beeping trucks whizzed by us. A scarlet Lamborghini careened inches away, at breakneck speed.

I handed the driver my phone. After a shouting match with my hotel's front desk, he finally figured out the way...

We chugged into the city, into the Bund area, passed by the waterfront's colonial architecture and nearby glittering glass towers, sprawling malls and department stores selling luxury brands.

Finally arriving at the hotel, a burgundy, art deco colossus, the bellboy met me and whisked away my bags.

When I greeted the front desk staff in Mandarin, a pony-tailed, rail-thin, post-college age girl in red/black hanfu replied to me in impeccable English. Her demeanor was gruff, her voice plangent, and her horn-rim glasses practically the size of grapefruits…

She averted eye contact, monotonously rattled off the breakfast buffet time, location, check out time, and handed me a key card, said the bags were already in the room.

After handing my passport back to me, with both hands, she pointed me in the direction of the elevator and returned to her phone.

"Service with a smile" wasn't a thing at this hotel, like most of China, I surmised, but it was sort of pleasant, sometimes, how no one kissed your ass or gave a general fuck…

On the 7th floor, I wandered through a cavernous hallway that was adorned with antique decor and Mondrian replicas and finally found my room, #721, and entered the fancy, compact, slightly dusty-smelling quarters.

The bed was queen-sized, with a comfy memory foam, super soft mattress- unlike the usual cement-style beds of Asia, and the furniture was a charming walnut color; the lamps, phones were vintage, 1930-esque.

The room's only window, a single casement, next to the bed, led only to a direct view of the adjacent building's red brick exterior.

I dumped my stuff. Got situated. The night was still young, and my stomach was growling for a better dinner than the microwave fare, beef noodle slop from the plane.

I went out, stopped by a tasty local restaurant, next door to the hotel, and had a sweet duck dish accompanied by steamed rice and stir-fried Cantonese cabbage. As I clamped my chopsticks on the last few bits of crispy duck skin, I received a text from my coworker, Denny, who was also in town for the conference.

Ole' Disco Denny, The Wildman, told me he'd just arrived and was headed to a bar and that I should meet him there.

Though my stomach was still queasy from the giardia, I didn't want to waste my first night in Shanghai doing my quotidian routine of TV, book, sleep, so I decided to join him, hoping to maybe meet a local lady or that a shot or two of whisky down the gullet might kill off the rest of the virus in my guts...

二

It was November, so it had rained and gotten colder, damper, as time passed deeper into night, and walking out of the restaurant, my breath appeared like vaporous mist.

Appropriately, I selected "November Rain" from my playlist, blasted Slash's glorious guitar into my earbuds and zipped up my leather jacket, stepped and

dodged through the masses of humanity in the streets, and I let Siri guide me to the subway.

There were 1.4 billion people in this country, and in places like Shanghai, it sure felt like that many…

Everywhere, there were people. People on every corner, in every building, every car, every bus, pretty much every inch of the city center had a person in or near it.

Most, like any metropolis, minded their business, hurried along, but I noticed an unusual number of obnoxious touts.

The touts mostly fell into two categories: either halfway decent looking young girls, speaking perfect English, on about trying local tea, or short, pushy, tacky dressed middle-aged guys, like gnomes, poking fake, gaudy watches in my face, grunting repeatedly, “Rolex, Rolex!”

These touts were practically the only people who paid attention to me, unlike other Chinese cities where simply being a foreigner rendered you a curiosity, a thing to be gawked at, taken pictures of, pointed at, yelled “hello” at, and basically considered a zoo animal.

I paid little attention to the touts, did my best to avoid eye contact, politely nodded “no” if we did lock eyes, and kept my earbuds firmly affixed...

Shanghai’s subway, despite being massively crowded, was impressive, state-of-the-art, almost futuristic, and it quickly carried me to the bar’s vicinity, which was only a few stops away.

Riding the escalator up to street level, I swiped through my GPS, located the bar, which turned out to be a restro-pub, in a gargantuan shopping center close by...

I rode up another escalator inside the shopping center, spotted my destination: “Cowboys Bar and Grill.”

Walking in through the open, arched double doors, I noticed the place was packed. But I also picked up on something funny. There were no women there. Only dudes. At first, I thought this was because of China’s gender disparity.

But scanning around, examining closer, I observed how all the guys were buff or at least in decent shape.

They were mostly young, too, with well-trimmed hair, and dressed quite stylishly.

Gazing over at the walls, I saw posters of Madonna, Lady Gaga, Queen, Jason Momoa, and then, yes, a rainbow flag.

It was a gay bar.

Ah shit, I thought to myself. Probably wouldn't meet a lady at this place.

I was surprised Denny had invited me here. He'd never struck me as gay, but I don't have the best gaydar.

I'd known Denny to be a skirt-chasing maniac. Wait, was he maybe bi?

He was a prankster, though, always pulling gags in the office. Perhaps it was a joke?

I wasn't sure, but I decided to take advantage of the "fabulous" drink special, slam a couple shots to finish off the virus, then have a stroll around the city, then head back to the hotel, creep online, probably jerk off to phone porn, the usual…

After draining a trio of Russian vodka shots, in rapid fire succession, and paying the African drag queen bartender, who'd winked at me several times, I texted Denny to see if he was at the bar. He replied with only a rainbow flag pic. Sneaky bastard!

Slightly crapulous, I decided to one up him, and I made a fake Grindr profile, with his pic, social media, and phone number, and I showed it to the drag queen bartender, asked her to post it on the bar's Weibo page.

Figured Disco Denny Boy would have some interesting correspondences tonight…

三

The drag queen waved sentimentally, feigned heartbreak as I left, and on my way to the subway stop, I happened upon a massage place that looked legit and decided to get a leisurely rubdown.

The place was attached to a chain hotel and had the usual foyer, front counter that took your shoes, confirmed which package you'd like.

I chose oil.

A balding, shifty-eyed, runty 50ish man in gray "Guccci" sweatpants and sweatshirt led me up a flight of stairs, down a dingy hallway, into a KTV room.

"No, I wanted an oil massage, not karaoke," I affirmed, but my words fell on deaf ears, and he scurried out.

I sat into the butterscotch brown leather couch in the center of the room, thinking perhaps another attendant would arrive to take me to the massage quarters.

But a second later, in slinked a very, very pretty young girl, maybe mid-20s, and slim, with catwalk legs…

The China Doll, the geisha white Asian beauty had sparkling sapphire lenses in her epicanthic eyes.

She was simply radiant in her black spandex miniskirt barely covering her pelvis.

And her white button-down blouse showcased a most yummy, spicy pair of round B-cup boobies!

This was some serious Kung Pao Pussy…

Her wavy, midnight mane was waist-length, parted to the left, and she swept it over her shoulder, sauntered towards me, like a kitten, her black pumps speaking with the cherry laminate flooring.

Wordlessly, she sat on my lap, crossed her black floral pattern pantyhose-sheathed legs, and wrapped her warm arms around me.

"What the fuck?" I thought to myself. Had I mistakenly come to a brothel?

I wasn't sure what I'd gotten myself into. But I certainly knew where I wanted to get into...

"You have pretty eye," the mysterious Geisha said to me, in a sultry voice. Her breath had a whiff of fruity candy to it.

“How about the other eye?” I quipped, wondering if my humor would land. But it didn’t. And she just quizzically stared at me for a second, like I was an asshole.

Sarcasm and plurals don’t usually translate well into the Chinese syntax.

Geisha licked her dark red, wide lips, leaned in and pecked me, and then backed away and timidly giggled.

I leaned towards her, pecking her softly. Her gem-like eyes widened with an expression of shock, and she shifted her gaze, for a split second, staring down at the floor, as if mired in trepidation, but then she swiveled her face back to mine and replied by kissing me again- this time slipping in her tongue.

And we were going at it, tongue-punching, sloppy, nasty, wet and wild smooching, tickling tonsils…

Hard to complain about snogging a yellow chick this smoking hot, but her kissing technique needed improvement; it was callow, far too aggressive.

I attempted to guide her with gentler, more romantic motions, lighter dips and dashes, but it was in vain, and I relented, matched her ferocity, reckless abandon, and then slipped my hand up into her blouse, over her microfiber, wireless bra, teasing and squeezing on her fantastic, pert little honey tits.

I broke our kiss, laid the Geisha Girl on the couch, hiked up her skirt, and marveled at her T-string thong panties, which were jet black, had strings like dental floss, and I gulped when I caught sight of one of her dark pink pussy lips poking out the V…

My cock was calescent, and it bulged, hardened stiff as cement. The Geisha reached up and lightly patted my tumescent little brother, over my jeans, and smiled approvingly, devilishly.

I reached down to yank her panties off, free her vagina, but my hands froze at the sight of another woman entering the room.

Sadly, it was not another super-hot chick. It was an older, frumpy cow with a bowl-cut hairdo. An obese Auntie in an aqua blue velvet jumpsuit.

The fat fucking bitch was angry, too, and ugly as a dragon...

四

Not sure if I was mistakenly molesting the bossbitch's daughter, I relented my perving, sat back into the couch. I felt like a naughty schoolboy.

The Auntie appeared happier, seeing that I'd taken my hands away from the chick's pussy.

The Geisha smiled at the Auntie, then looked and smiled at me, fixed her skirt and sat her hot tight ass onto my lap, its heat blanketing, grinding into my erection.

Giggling, Geisha hugged me and ran her fingers through my hair…

The Auntie plopped down next to us, the couch shaking, squeaking as she sat into it, and with a Cheshire grin, she said "hello" and told me that I looked like a white Drake. Given her age, nationality, I was surprised she even knew who that was.

Auntie spoke English quite well and asked me lots of questions, about my job, salary, where I was from, where I was staying. I lied in all my answers. I told her my name was Charles Bukowski and I was a police officer from Kansas City, visiting Shanghai before a cruise.

I thought that saying I was a cop might put her off, do away with whatever funny business might be about to go down. Maybe she'd go away and let me return to molesting the Mystery Geisha.

But it didn't seem to make a difference, and while I spoke with the Auntie, with Mystery Geisha's tight ass burning into my lap, an impish, 50ish bucktooth motherfucker, in a tacky suit, like a caricature of a British butler, brought in several trays of drinks, food, and then ducked out the room quickly.

Noticing the food, not wanting it, not having ordered it and not having a good feeling about where things were going, my dick shriveled like a frightened turtle, and I cut short the convo with Auntie.

"I didn't order that food. Um, I think I'll go now…" I said, as I politely loosened and lowered the Geisha from off me and got up from the leather sofa.

Right as my knees straightened, a trio of pissed off dudes burst in, the three assholes in a triangle formation. One up front, two behind.

The frontman was 30ish and effete, dressed in tight-fitting bright blue slacks and a hot pink polo shirt.

The other two wore the same Guccci sweatsuits as the front counter guy, but they were younger and far taller, bigger and rougher- between the two of them they probably didn't have a full set of teeth.

The effeminate one, Pink Shirt, slipped me a handwritten bill for 2100 RMB. About $300.

The Auntie and Geisha Girl promptly left the room smirking.

Watching Geisha's pear-shaped ass as she girlishly stepped away, I knew heartbreak…

Pink Shirt had an angry scowl, but, given how thin he was, and seeing his tight, loud-colored clothes, and then noticing he had a man-bun, it was hard to take him seriously.

I wasn't sure what pissed me off more. The man-bun or the bullshit bill.

"You pay for food!" Pink Shirt proclaimed, as menacingly as he could.

The other two goons, who didn't look like they couldn't fight, stood blocking the doorway, making their best war-faces too.

Ah shit, here it was. I was being Shanghaied!

五

I evaluated my options.

A: Do I pay them, which would encourage them to continue their nefarious deeds?

Fuck no!

B: Do I call the police?

In China?! Yeah right! There's no rule of law in China! These assholes probably ARE police officers or are paying off, drinking buddies with, or cousins of the coppers.

C: Do I try to fight them?

Well, I'm in decent shape, was an amateur boxer many moons ago.

BUT, if I beat them down, I go to jail, wind up like Wendell Brown... Even though there were three of them, it'd probably be easy to fuck them up. Contrary to popular Western belief, very few Chinese, in China, nowadays, know Kung Fu, or have ever been in a real fight.

BUT, if they did know Kung Fu, went Jackie Chan on my ass, I'd get my face smashed, get robbed, go to the hospital, pay extortionate medical bills, and maybe ALSO go to jail, all of which would totally suck.

Lose-Lose, Option C.

So, I chose Option D.

Buy time…

"Hey," I pleaded, "I'm really sorry, guys. But I don't have that sorta money on me. I'm a tourist. I don't have that Ali- thingamajig.

"I really don't want any trouble. Look, let's go out by the subway station. There's an ATM. I'll pay you in cash," I promised, speaking as conciliatorily as I could, holding my arms in the air as if the goons were cops pointing guns.

Then, without warning, without calculation, I ripped a thunderclap of a fart, a giardia, rotten egg stinker.

The three recoiled, covered and held their noses, retched and shook their heads in disgust. I thought the stink might paralyze them, allow me time to make a run for it, escape, but after the initial impact, they regrouped and hastily gathered their minds.

They spoke amongst each other in their local dialect. I couldn't understand any of it. One of the ruffians seemed to have objections, was loudly motioning at me, yelling something, but Pink Shirt overruled him.

“Okay. We take you.” Pink Shirt said, nodding me towards the door.

The three assholes allowed me to pass, followed closely behind me. Walking down the hallway, I saw the Geisha Girl, two other pretties and Auntie sitting at a green felt table, smoking cigarettes, laughing and playing mahjong.

Shit, at least I kissed her, felt her up, saw her pussy lip, I thought, consoling myself...

I wanted my shoes, my Air Jordan 1 Low Laser Blues, but Pink Shirt wouldn’t let me have them. The man-bun fuck!

“You get shoe after you pay,” he growled, and pointed me to the door, and I stepped out into the cold wet misty night wearing flip-flop type slippers with no socks.

The three following behind me, I knew it was time to make my move.

I stopped, arched my ass directly at them and let out another violent, effluvial fart.

The noxious burst of gas temporarily stunned them, and I kicked off my slippers and tore off running, into the crowded street, dodging and shoving by masses of people, nearly knocking over a little pajama wearing dancing granny, who shrieked loudly after I bumped into her.

The three fucks gave chase, but I was faster, and I knew I had to ditch them quickly or else they might catch up or enlist the help of a cop who’d surely take their side in the matter.

I ran into the road, alongside traffic, and the road’s surface, the bitumen, felt gentler and warmer than that of the rough sidewalk.

WHHHHHHHHIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIRRRRRRRRRRRRR was all I heard, and BAM, an e-bike slammed into me.

The driver, a deliveryman, and I, in tandem, collapsed, crashed to the ground, and the food in a plastic bag hanging from the handlebar of his bike- rice, veggies, mystery meat- went splashing into and over the asphalt like a modern art painting.

The trio chasing me, upon seeing the accident, stopped and stood panting and wheezing, frowned at me and briskly walked off in the other direction.

It was then the adrenaline receded, and a massive surge of pain rushed over me.

I looked down and saw my right leg bent out of shape, grotesquely, a fucking Gordon Hayward.

Cars in the vicinity drove by, honking, as I lay there.

The deliveryman, not seriously hurt, at least not like me, nothing broken, I guess, got up, dusted off his mustard yellow jumpsuit, slid up his helmet's visor and cursed at me, picked up his bike and zoomed off.

People nearby took pics with their phones. Many stood and stared.

Grimacing, I fished out my phone from my jean pocket and called the conference organizer, told her I'd been in a traffic accident, sent her my GPS coordinates.

She said she'd call an ambulance, and I dragged myself to the curb, sat and waited, pissed about getting Shanghaied, pissed about breaking my leg, losing my Jordans, and pissed I couldn't bang the Geisha.

The only thing that gave me any solace was thinking of Denny's Grindr profile and hoping he'd be getting sent dick pics and shit…

A JUMP TO HEAVEN'S GATE

—

Taylor was born and raised in Grayson, Kentucky, a rural, scenic little town with a population of about 4,000.

He'd had a fairly typical small-town American life, was handsome, outgoing and popular and played wide receiver on the football team in high school. He'd dreamed of playing in the NFL, being a superstar athlete, marrying a supermodel, or marrying his namesake, Taylor Swift, Taylor & Taylor… Oh, he could see them, hand in hand, walking on a glistering beach, under a crimson sun, their names written in the sand… Taylor & Taylor…

He'd marry Taylor Swift, and he'd be making millions, playing in the NFL, breaking all of Jerry Rice's receiving records. He'd be on TV commercials. He'd be somebody. Somebody GREAT. That was his dream…

But that dream didn't pan out, and his varsity teams stumbled to losing records, didn't even qualify for the playoffs, and he wasn't recruited by any colleges, and his grades weren't high enough to earn him any scholarships.

Aside from football, it was largely parties and girls that occupied his time in high school, not too much else. Books had never been a priority.

However, he had developed an interest in science, and became infatuated with the field of neuroscience, obsessed with the idea of him becoming a world-renown neuroscientist, having taken a shine to the topic after watching a few Sam Harris YouTube videos.

After enrolling at Eastern Kentucky University and failing to make the team as a walk-on, he completed his bachelor's in pre-med (with a minor in frat parties, binge-drinking). Upon receiving his diploma, though, he again didn't have the grades for a scholarship to med school and went further into debt as he struggled through a neuroscience PhD program at his alma mater and worked part-time stocking shelves at Walmart.

His drinking, which had been a weekend, party thing through high school and college, became an everyday thing for him. He'd begun drinking his coffee splashed with Jameson Irish whiskey, shotgunning 3 or 4 Busch beers with lunch, and pounding 6 or 7 shots of Jack Daniels or Old Crow or Jim Beam bourbon alongside dinner.

Despite his heavy alcohol intake, he was functional, never getting too buzzed where he couldn't show up to school or work, get his tasks done, though the quality of his PhD research, papers was erratic, and he'd regularly be involved in shouting matches, sometimes shoving and in minor physical altercations with coworkers at Walmart, but nothing severe enough to warrant termination.

After eking out his thesis, completing his PhD, his dissertation, his defense, which he considered to be a work of unapparelled genius, an ingenious work severely misunderstood and maligned by his advisors, Taylor packed his belongings into garbage bags, crammed all his stuff into the trunk and backseat of his blue Ford

Focus, and drove from Richmond to Louisville to seek work and fulfil his dream of being a famous academic or a wealthy researcher or highly regarded scientist at a multinational corporation. But, to his chagrin, he had trouble finding ANY work in academics or research. At all.

He lacked work experience in the neuroscience field, yet he had just graduated, and many employers wanted a candidate with prior work experience.

This infuriated him. How was he supposed to have 2 or 3 years of work experience when he'd spent the last few years completing his studies? It was indeed quite the conundrum…

The job search left him with a sour taste, and soon he'd developed a disdain for his country, America.

His whole life his parents, teachers, the TV told him of the virtues of a college education and that once he had a diploma in his hand, then he'd have a great job, a house, wife, kids, picket fence, et cetera.

And he'd done that.

Yet here he was, with a fucking PhD, and still no one was giving him an opportunity. No one was giving him shit, and door after door slammed in his face, application after application was rejected, and no one seemed to recognize the brilliance of the online research he'd done and published on his blog and spoken of on his YouTube channel, which had nearly THREE HUNDRED subscribers…

Further and further he sank into credit card debt, trying to simply pay his rent, car, buy food, and his debt compounded, started piling high as a Himalayan mountain- this on top of the six figure sum he already owed in student loans.

Shit…

It made him more and more bitter every day.

It wasn't only the economics of America, it not being the meritocracy he thought. He also hated the atmosphere, the political correctness, the bickering, the Twitter battles, the liberals and conservatives whining at each other while people like him barely made end's meat. It was gross. It was stupid. What had this great country become?

—

Fed up, Taylor began to look elsewhere, look eastward, far east, to China.

China was the next great superpower, he posited. It was inevitable, with its large population, 600 million strong middle class, its manufacturing base and high-tech society and bullet trains he'd seen on YouTube videos.

He marveled at China's ever-expanding economy and ingenuity and admired how the government of China got things done. How the people there were so united, so together, had such purpose. China reminded him of America back in the 1950s, when the country really was great.

Taylor had read online of the abundance of work, business and financial opportunities in China and began to study Mandarin.

He started applying to jobs at companies and think tanks, thinking he'd be highly prized, considering his PhD, but all he could find was work teaching English, mostly at training centers and public schools, and many of those jobs consisted of singing songs, dancing and playing games with children, which wasn't for him, someone of his abilities and education.

Initially he was disappointed, but his spirits lifted when he came across a job for a position at a university near Beijing.

The job was for a "university lecturer", and while it consisted mostly of teaching conversational English classes, it did offer possibilities of "research" and grant money for projects. Taylor figured it could be a gateway to bigger and better things and sort of liked the idea of being a "college lecturer." It sounded very distinguished. Surely, he'd be highly respected.

After a brief Skype interview, in which he was asked only a couple basic questions about himself, he was hired, sent a contract.

The work visa process for a "Z Visa" was a pain in the ass, cost him nearly $700 in assorted fees, but he thought of the old adage, "It takes money to make…" and he sucked it up, went further into debt, deeper down the hole after shelling out an additional $1000 for his plane ticket.

Finally, though, after 2 months, he had secured his visa and boarded a plane, for the first time ever, and sat squished into the middle seat, in coach, and flew from Louisville to Beijing, on four connecting flights, for a total of 6,853 miles and 28 hours, crossing clouds, mountains, oceans and timelines, on a preternatural journey to begin his new life…

三

Despite seeing videos, pictures online, Beijing was nothing like he could have imagined. It was colossal and awe-inspiring in a way that was almost like prestidigitation. He was overwhelmed, speechless as he groggily walked through and out of the sprawling, shiny new Beijing airport.

He then boarded a lemon-yellow cab, handed the cagey flattop driver a slip of paper with the school's address and buckled up as they roared off into the brownish dusk, en route to his school.

Taylor whiplashed and shook with the vehicle as the driver tore through the city streets and highways like a bat out of hell. Panning his jetlagged gaze around in the backseat of the cab, he couldn't believe how many people there were in Beijing, people in such massive clusters, swarming and teeming everywhere and anywhere, streets, roads, buses, buildings, everything peopled, jam-packed, huddled masses, bunched in, packed like sardines, fucking swimming, brimming, spilling oceans of humanity. There were probably more humans on one city block, bus or subway train than in the entirety of his hometown.

(These Chinese people must really be horny and fuck a lot, he pondered. How else could there be such masses of them…)

Beijing city went on for infinity and was eclectic, varying the spectrum from battered weather-worn gray blocks of Soviet style apartments that sat directly adjacent to ritzy high-rises, and towering glass office buildings, KFCs, shopping malls and supertall skyscrapers situated next to squarish traditional Chinese homes, Hutongs and pagodas and slanted roof Asian temples, the city a truly extensive mix, a striking contrast of old and new.

Taylor's eyes lit up when he thought he spotted a UFO. But it was in fact a circular black drone that whirred by his taxi's window and soared off and sliced into the gray haze of the chunky sky, and Taylor sat enthralled, his head cocked back, staring out at the cityscape full of flickering neon glows from endless rows of immense structures, the city's dusky radiance like something from a sci-fi movie…

It was truly mesmerizing for him, a small-town kid, to arrive in such a dizzying, bustling metropolis… I mean, he'd been to New York City once, but this was another thing altogether, a place this alien, busy, populated and massive…

For the first time in his life, he felt like he was on the verge of greatness. For the first time, he felt like somebody, and he thought of his classmates from high school, still in his hometown, still at the same DQ. Those nobodies still not doing shit. If only they could see him now! He was in fucking CHINA!

四

His university was on the city's satellite outskirts, Beijing's never-ending, expansive edge. The campus in what used to be a farming community that was becoming urbanized, developed. Along the roads were tiny lots growing vegetables and ramshackle tin houses and restaurants, small groceries, street side vendors and boxy crumbling concrete buildings.

On nearly every street were newly built mobile phone stores, at least one or two phone stores per block.

Red banners and Chinese flags hung from nearly all buildings, and there were giant billboards featuring Chairman Xi smiling and PLA soldiers saluting at nearly every intersection.

The most prevalent thing, though, in the area had to be the construction. Construction on a scale Taylor couldn't have exactly imagined.

There were half empty, half torn down, half constructed, newly constructed and about to be constructed structures situated on each street. There were newly built, mostly empty houses, office buildings, office parks, schools, stores, and some of the stores had fake "Starbucks" signs plastered on their fronts and mannequins standing inside the vacant buildings.

Constant cavalcades of mud-caked construction vehicles, semitrucks rumbled around every road, their tailpipes belching big black clouds of fumes that floated and dissolved upwards. The trucks drove furiously, honking their horns at one another, with purpose.

The trucks' cargo rattled like storms and the trucks' clangor bled into and mixed with the ubiquitous construction sites' drilling, the clanking of heavy machinery, and the two harmonized, sounded a mechanical din.

The half torn up buildings and rubble all around first reminded Taylor of a tornado hit town, but the gray skies and ocher dust and local people in ratty clothes and facemasks sort of gave the place a Mad Max vibe…

五

The university was nice, though. Like a little oasis amid the bipolar fracas of construction and decay.

The campus was green, with many willow and poplar trees, lush foliage, violet and pink flowers dotted about its sprawling grounds.

The buildings appeared sleek and modern, Taylor thought, at first, while being given a tour of the campus by the middle-aged gruff admin lady who'd received him upon his arrival to campus, the lady's lips not moving much as she spoke and her conservative, long gray pleated dress and her bowl-haircut, her bottle size eyeglasses reminding him of a Mormon, or a cult member…

Peering, looking closer into the buildings, though, as they walked briskly, Taylor discovered that many were empty or half-built inside... The school was only 10 years old and still developing, he figured, like the surrounding area, like anything, really; it was a work in progress…

At least his apartment, on the far edge of the campus, was, well, suitable. It was a basic but clean, spacious 2 bedroom on an upper floor of an 18 storey building.

But it had a few issues…

It as well looked a lot more posh on the outside than it was inside, its outside like a tall red-brick building, maybe a hotel or condo; but its inside had wires hanging

from the ceilings in the hallways, and the hallways weren't lit at night, one needed to use a flashlight to navigate the corridors, and the elevator kinda freaked him out because it still had peeling plastic wrappings on its inside walls and was plastered with ad stickers and graffiti scrawled about and phone numbers written randomly about the elevator car's silver metal walls.

The elevator also had a persistent odor of secondhand smoke as security guards from the building, as well as Chinese university teachers, would smoke cigarettes in the elevators, and hallways, too. There were often cigarette butts strewn, stubbed out on the elevator floor.

(Fire hazards had always freaked him out, and the fire hoses in the hallways didn't appear functional, and where a fire extinguisher was supposed to be encased, in a glass box, next to the elevators, there sat only a 1-liter plastic bottle filled with water… It unnerved Taylor, but the building was built of concrete and likely less flammable, or so he hoped…)

The building's construction was sorta scary too. Although the apartment building was newly built, there were several cracks, fissures running up the walls in Taylor's apartment, which he hoped were only superficial, those cracks.

The furniture, especially the bed, was hard and uncomfortable. Buying several additional pillows, cushions, and a bed mat, helped.

The road next to the apartment complex was a two lane highway, and it was a bit annoying, with semitrucks and construction vehicles barreling down it, at all hours, and the trucks would constantly pop jake brakes and blare, honk, and beep high decibel horns at one another and at every other vehicle nearby.

Earphones, earplugs, and a white noise app helped with the beeping from the trucks, but the sounds were so high-pitched, they could still be heard slightly…

What's more, Taylor had several bouts of diarrhea upon moving to China, nearly once or twice a week, having loose sloppy shits or other stomach issues, and he quickly developed breathing problems, too, chronic coughs likely attributable to air pollution in the area, the air leaving layers of brownish dust that coated everything in his apartment, especially out on his balcony, the dust stubbornly present and persistent, no matter how much or how often he cleaned.

Still, despite the flaws, his life in China was an improvement, a big step up from Walmart and the shithole apartments he'd lived in, with their paper-thin walls and bowing ceilings that squeaked and squealed like a pig being slaughtered. Even the slight rattle and squeal of the honking trucks was better than hearing that neighbor lady's baby's shrieking and crying or the young couple who were always screaming and cursing at each other, and for sure better than hearing and smelling his last roommate's farts.

And it was WAY better, too, than the double-wide he'd grown up in.

For the first time in his life he was able to live alone, with no family or roommates. He finally had a bathroom all to himself.

Best of all, the apartment, utilities were free, so he couldn't complain, and he enjoyed that he was the only foreign teacher at his school, the attention it gave him, how tall it made him feel, and he loved his light, 10 hour per week schedule teaching classes of docile Chinese students, most of whom just slept or played on phones while he stood at his podium, reading from the class textbook or from a university provided PowerPoint.

Upon reaching China, Taylor was so elated, so high on the country, he barely drank, cutting back to a beer or two, maybe, at night, sometimes not drinking anything for the first time since high school. Of course, it did help, too, that the local beer tasted like piss and the national hard liquor, baijiu, tasted like foot fungus sieved through a stinky sock.

Taylor found himself enjoying his semi-sobriety, was sleeping far better at night and had gone down a couple pant sizes.

Life was good. He was in China! He was out in the world. He was a man of the world. An international traveler. A somebody. He was finally on his way to doing something, something great!

六

One of the best parts of his job was living on campus and not having to drive or own a car. Not needing a car was a blessing. He was saving tons of cash not having to pay for gas, insurance, maintenance, and all the other shit car owners

get raped for, and he finally was earning enough money to pay off a portion of his student debt.

Thanks to his light teaching hours, he had enough time to study Mandarin, and was at it, diligently, swiftly becoming much more conversant, discovering he had a flair for the language, its syntax, characters and tones coming naturally to him. Perhaps he'd been Marco Polo in a previous life…

With his rapid rate of improvement, his linguistic skills were soon up to snuff, and he'd decided to venture out, see the local sights. But, after the lengthy trip via bullet train and several subway stops, Taylor'd been dismayed to discover that Sanlitun, and most of the expat bars, foreign restaurants in Beijing had either been shut down or had gone out of business.

"Where were all the expats, the parties?" he pondered. The few expats he did encounter on the streets looked paranoid, with eyes of shit, or they looked dead, more like zombies than humans, walking hollow with thousand-yard stares…

Beijing turned out to be far more boring as a city than he expected, no parties or much going on. There were police everywhere, many in riot gear, and he'd been stopped twice by the police, randomly at subway stations, to have his passport checked, questioned like a criminal on his comings and goings.

He left disappointed. He decided to stick more around his local area and be more adventurous, have a "real China" experience. Fuck those walking dead expats and fascist cops in Beijing. He'd learn more Chinese, anyway, talking to Chinese people.

Inspired after seeing a video on YouTube by a South African guy called Winston, who'd explored China via motorcycle, Taylor decided to do a bit of the same and bought a secondhand motorcycle from a Chinese coworker, a short guy with a weirdly sloped forehead, and Taylor excitedly strapped on a Nazi SS style helmet he'd gotten along with the bike and revved up the engine and set out to explore the local village near the school, riding off feeling like he was Indiana Jones.

七

To Taylor's surprise, even in the village, there were security cameras everywhere, several, atop poles, on every block, cameras attached to buildings, cameras

hanging from bridges. He wondered what could be happening here in the outskirts to warrant such surveillance…

Also, to his surprise, he discovered the local townspeople weren't very welcoming of foreigners. Whereas his students or the city dwellers were either friendly, polite, or at worst apathetic, those in the village, stared and pointed at him like he was a zoo animal, and many gave him dirty looks, were passively aggressive, and one toothless old man in raggedy blue slacks and blazer spit at him, shook his fist and yelled something about "Panmunjom!"

After hearing the old man curse at him, and understanding a few things the locals had said about his personal appearance (him being fat, having a big nose) he started to regret learning Chinese…

He tried not to let it upset him, thinking it must be similar to America, how in hicktowns, parts of hillbilly Kentucky, people were ugly and racist but in big cities like Louisville, or metropolises like New York City, LA people were more educated and way cooler, generally. It's probably like that anywhere, China included, he thought.

And he wouldn't let it faze him anymore, dammit!

Dammit, he was going to make this work, score a high-paying job in Shanghai or Beijing, and he became even more determined to study Chinese, and his learning only accelerated, being immersed in it like he was, and shortly he knew enough characters to partially read newspaper articles, and he began reading news sites on the Chinese internet.

What he saw, though, online, on the Chinese internet, shocked him. Nearly every other national news article was about America or Japan. About how those countries were conspiring to fuck over China somehow, preparing for war, or attempting to steal an island or other territory, not just Taiwan, which Mainland Chinese had long thought belonged to them and demanded to have returned from America, but the Mainland Chinese also claimed several tiny islands belonging to other countries, as well as a huge chunk of international seas.

He'd noticed the official Chinese news agency, Xinhua (which translated almost to "Newspeak") paid special attention to America's failings, especially mass shootings, religiously reporting any shooting in America, which might have been

the reason why so many of his students asked him if in America “everyone has a gun.”

As a person who’d become disillusioned and bitter with America, he didn’t mind shitting on it, himself, but to be off in a faraway land, and to discover how openly hostile the Chinese State media was towards his country of origin, really gave him a sick feeling.

Having researched China’s economy, he’d seen how America and Japan were China’s largest trading partners and how much foreign investment in China had lifted so many out of poverty. It boggled his mind that a country so dependent and such a beneficiary of global trade would have such antipathy for the nations it conducted trillions of dollars of trade with…

But his mind was really thrown for a loop when he read the online comments that followed the articles.

Open hatred, venom towards America and open calls from Chinese netizens for America to be attacked, for war, for American cities to be nuked.

Outright racist language against foreigners, especially blacks, which was befuddling considering how much the Chinese were into the NBA. And it wasn’t only a few nutjobs spewing such bigotry, it was thousands upon thousands of comments, endless streams of racist posts, none of which were censored or deleted, the whole thing making even a guy from Kentucky cringe.

Again, Taylor thought that maybe this was just trolls or idiots like on YouTube videos’ comments or freakish right-wing extremists like Breitbart. He again figured he wouldn’t find a lot of those people in a big city like Beijing or Shanghai, and that’s where he’d go anyway and where he’d do amazing things after he’d learned enough Chinese.

He was going to land a job at a big Chinese company, make fistfuls of cash, live the “Chinese Dream.” Nothing would stop him.

Every morning, he’d eat breakfast listening to Chinese language learning videos; afternoons were spent upping his calligraphy skills, sitting perched over his desk, with his pen to paper, copying Chinese characters, attuned to their radicals and strokes. And every evening, he’d spend hours reading Chinese children’s books,

reading the pinyin, perfecting and practicing his tones, and then afterwards he'd have conversations with himself in the mirror, saying what he knew or learned that day or reading his learning exercises, dialogues aloud.

And his life got even better when he met a girl, one of his students, called "Apple", a petite, dark-skinned Han Chinese lovely from Gansu province. The raven-haired beauty with a slender body, moon face, crooked smile and sexy librarian glasses. Apple spoke excellent English, which helped their courtship bloom, and she soon enough became Taylor's first serious girlfriend.

He'd been having her over to his apartment, and, after only a couple weeks, she was living with him there…

Taylor imagined marrying her, taking her to Beijing. Them in a ritzy high-rise. Them with kids. Him making fistfuls of cash, speaking perfect Mandarin and working his way up to being a high ranking executive at a company that bought other companies and shit like that. Him on a private jet… Him featured on Chinese TV… Him living his Chinese Dream…

But that whole narrative took a different turn.

When a virus appeared in Wuhan…

八

It started off as an obscure story he saw posted in a China expat group online.

A mysterious pneumonia that'd broken out in Wuhan, near a "wet" market, a market selling live animals for slaughter.

He'd written it off, initially, thinking it was no big deal. There often were small-scale viral breakouts in China, especially related to food, food poisoning. But then, this one, of course, turned out differently, and it snowballed, became an epidemic, and nearly the whole of China, including his area of Beijing, was swiftly locked down; the country transformed into a 1-billion-person prison.

Forced to stay in his apartment, 23 and a half hours per day (allowed out only for a necessary trip to the campus grocery store or for takeout from the cafeteria),

and on some days not allowed out at all, made to stay inside for 24 hours a day, his apartment started to seem smaller and smaller, the walls closing in on him.

His girlfriend was forced to leave sooner than anticipated and was removed, in tears, by campus police because she wasn't registered to live in the domicile.

After she returned home, she came clean to her parents about her relationship with Taylor, and her father mercilessly beat and slapped her, bloodying her nose and threatening to kill her if she made him lose any more face and commanding her to never see that "white trash" again...

Losing his girlfriend was a true punch in the dick, and Taylor plunged hard into despair. He missed her deeply, his Apple, her soft touch, her smell, the egg-fried rice she'd cooked him, and how she'd warmed his bed at night, the way her little feet tickled at his legs underneath the sheets…

Losing his Apple, along with the malaise of being locked down pretty much 24/7, led Taylor back to the bottle, in a severe way, after Taylor discovered that although it tasted like wet shit, baijiu was super high in alcohol content and got him sloppy ass drunk.

Not only was his personal life fucked, but things across China deteriorated diplomatically when a theory was put forth, espoused not just by a freak on the internet, but by foreign ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian, that the virus was brought to China, purposely, to destroy China, by the US military, and all over China, foreigners were targeted, fired from jobs, evicted from apartments (videos emerged of Africans in Guangzhou forcibly removed from their homes, turned homeless, made to sleep rough), and foreigners were stigmatized, refused entry into grocery stores, and there were scattered reports of violent attacks against foreigners in China.

The hatred, incitement towards foreigners in China that was typically only online, priorly, was now spilling into the public space.

So Taylor, sipping on baijiu, decided it was time to bounce, at least for the time being, and put his China Dream on hold.

Several neighboring Asian countries had already closed their borders to foreigners, and flights back to America were few and far between or outrageously pricey, but

Taylor did see that Thailand was still open. Plenty of flights going there, even as China had been locked down.

Taylor booked a ticket and boarded a half-full plane to Bangkok, feeling like an escaped convict as he passed through the airport full of police in facemasks and medical personnel in spacesuits.

九

When Taylor arrived in Bangkok, he wondered why he hadn't been there the whole time.

There was sun, palm trees, and smoking hot babes everywhere, with bigger tits and asses, and the place was sunny, relaxed, and unlike most of the Chinese, who only talked with their faces, the Thais smiled and were friendly, genuinely so, without being simpering, and even people working at 7-Eleven spoke English fluently or knew enough English to get by.

There were foreigners, bars, parties everywhere, and the foreigners there weren't zombies like in Beijing. They were fucking chill and there to have fun, and on his first night he'd hooked up with a Heidi-looking German backpacker girl he met at the airport and they had a wild and kinky fuck, a perfect rebound fuck… The Euro-chick letting him do things no other girl would…

Seriously, why hadn't he been here all along? he wondered over a breakfast slice of pizza from 7-Eleven.

But then he started looking around at teaching jobs in Thailand, disappointingly discovering that the overabundance of existing foreigners, the sagging Thai economy and hordes of cheaper Filipino teachers had resulted in pittance wages, many teaching jobs in Thailand offering only around $700 to $1000 per month and requiring far longer hours than he'd been working.

Looking at the job ads online sent him into a rage. Like, $1000 a month? For someone as smart as him? $1000 a month? For a doctor of neuroscience? For a PhD? Fuck that! That wasn't him. He'd wait out the situation in China. He could still go to Shanghai, make tons of money. This pandemic will pass. Someone would find a cure. Things would simmer down…

But he found there would be no fast fix, and that the situation in China for foreigners just got worse and worse, with more reports of violence and discrimination and soon enough, foreigners were banned from entering China, indefinitely, even those with residence permits and work permits.

Then the coronavirus spread to Thailand, not as severely as other nations, though still enough to close most non-essential businesses.

With nowhere to go, nothing to do, not able to afford a flight back to America, Taylor began to sink deeper into desolation.

Confined to his $7 per night, windowless room in a rundown guesthouse near Khao San Road, he was drinking more than ever.

He'd become afraid of sleep, afraid of the recent nightmare cycle that'd plagued him, the nightmares of naked women in surgical masks brandishing kitchen knives, the naked women chasing him through Jewish graveyards, the graveyards with mutilated tiger carcasses hanging by nooses from fir trees…

To avoid the strong arms of sleep he'd take Yaba pills and spend much of his time at night alone up on the silvered roof of his guesthouse, his limbs feeling heavy, and there he'd smoke cigarettes, and gulp red bull mixed with rum, and he'd sit slouched on a plastic stool, watching cockroaches, lizards, rats in the alley below, how they scurried up and down the pastel ledges and angles and crevices of the neighboring buildings, the dilapidated buildings.

The buildings that were nothing but stacks of boxes and levels and open doors and windowsills. And he'd stare out at the flapping clothes hanging humid, hanging over the iron bars, cages over the windows.

And he'd sniff at the mélange of Bangkok's scents, the fried noodles, the acrid diesel exhaust, and there, on that roof, he'd listen to his ghosts and to the screaming motorbikes passing the void…

┼

The four walls of his tiny guesthouse room started to close in on him like his apartment had before.

The white of the paint was all he could see.

Though he wasn't sure he'd ever return to China, he kept up his Chinese studies, if nothing else out of obstinance and spite, and he would try to have conversations again with the mirror. But it was useless. Staring at his reflection, his face was either distorted or stiff as a mask, and its lines, especially those on his forehead, told of age.

To study Chinese, he'd mostly been reading Chinese news, avoiding the politically charged stuff, virus stuff and comment sections and had looked into more local news articles and had been developing a fixation with traffic accidents, of which there were a daily deluge, a consistent supply…

Car accidents. Bus accidents. Buses plunging into rivers. Cars hitting pedestrians. Trucks sideswiping motorcyclists. The accidents involving motorcyclists were the most spectacular, the combination of high speeds and velocity, the motorcycle riders being propelled, flying acrobatically, high into the air, crashing into somersaults on the pavement, their forms ending contorted and crushed and twisted like blood and bone pretzels.

There were thousands of such videos on the Chinese internet, many featuring musical accompaniment, usually racy classical music, and Taylor would spend his hours watching them on endless loops.

Drinking about a 70 cl bottle of Thai whiskey or rum per day, for the first time, Taylor thought of killing himself. Ending it all. And once he thought of suicide, he stopped fearing sleep, and he found he'd been enjoying his slumber, having pleasant dreams, again in the graveyards, but these dreams were of sunny days in graveyards, of himself naked, himself walking leisurely by deer that were eating, gnawing on the green grass matting the soil around the gravestones, the happy animals smiling up at him, while chewing on the hair of the dead.

Taylor loved the carefree state sleep brought him, and he'd considered how pleasing death, the "big sleep" would be. Never having to worry about anything again. And he wondered what would happen after he died, if there was something better than this.

He'd never been suicidal before. But now it was all he could think of. He thought of ways to kill himself, and jumping was the first that came to mind. Jumping.

Jumping from a building, a tall building, thinking the harder he plunged, smacked and clapped to the concrete, the more powerful it'd push his soul and could launch him into whatever dimension awaited him next.

Daily visions of jumping entered his drunken thoughts, his drunken daydreams. And instead of car crash videos, he became fixated on jumpers, videos of jumpers, 9/11 videos, *Faces of Death* videos, and he wondered where the jumpers had ended up, which dimension.

The classic Van Halen song "Jump" showed up on his YouTube playlist, and he'd listen to it, over and over…

Might as well… Might as well…

┼—

Watching the Van Halen "Jump" video, he believed there were secret messages in the video, a message, a code, a cipher, something in Eddie Van Halen's wry smile or David Lee Roth's dancing and Roth's acrobatic dropkicks, Roth's mouthing of "Jump" at the video's end, and Taylor believed that the song was leading him to another place, another world, that Bangkok was a portal to something else, a higher plane, and if he jumped, fell hard enough to the pavement, he really could force his soul to exit his body and nudge it to the next realm.

And he pondered the next realm, slamming spicy shot after shot of Thai whiskey, thinking of the gate, the beautiful gate, leading to the Candyland, the Willy Wonka paradise that must await him behind the gate…

On YouTube he searched for gates, hoping to unlock the code, and he found a video from the group Heaven's Gate, its leader Do, and, enraptured, Taylor heeded the message.

He realized it was a sign, an omen and invitation. Do had contacted him, through time and space and was attempting to wave Taylor to the realm, that Taylor jumping would lead him to the comet Hale-Bopp, the comet Do and his flock had boarded to escape Earth and Earth's crises. Taylor realized that the coronavirus was a catalyst, an invitation, a prodding, a sign to escape and let the Earth wash the species.

Once Taylor sucked dry the whiskey bottle, it all made sense. He knew it was time. And he strapped on his Nikes and stumbled up to the guesthouse's roof.

十二

Up on the roof, standing near the ledge, Taylor saw out through the swampy heat of the Bangkok night, swung his head, slowly, from side to side and gazed out at the neon-lit skyscrapers, the buildings' lantern eyes, thinking how one or two of the buildings were in on it, how one or two of those metal spirals of lights were likely rockets ready to blast off and glide into the galaxy, cross the gate…

One or two of the buildings probably had jumpers like him, ready to, or having already jumped and joined Heaven's Gate. Graduated to the next realm. Taylor could see the jumpers smiling and waving at him before jumping, diving gloriously, flying like swans…

Taylor understood. He knew he wouldn't be a football star. He wouldn't be a famous neuroscientist. He wouldn't be a rich businessman in Shanghai. And it was for the better. Humans. The Earth. It was all fucked. Whether by disease, war, a supervolcano, an asteroid or the sun burning out, humans were fucked. The planet would die. Everyone on Earth would die.

But not him. He would escape. This was it, his passage, his route, his tunnel through the galaxy. He'd go. This was it. This was the great thing he was destined to do. He would escape. He would no longer suffer humanity.

He would no longer be a human or a prisoner of Planet Earth. He'd be on a new planet. He'd have a new body. Knowing this, knowing his destiny, knowing the TRUTH, saw him in the most euphoric state he'd ever been…

Taylor, his legs turning into snakes, cranked up "Jump" in his earbuds, and he sparked up a menthol cigarette, sucked in the minty cool smoke, let the icy smoke fill his lungs up like balloons, rounded his lips and exhaled deeply, shooting a funnel cloud of smoke that morphed into a misty form, a form of an eyeless, gaunt face that hovered in front of him and shrieked: "I will show you sleep in a handful," and then dissolved into sparkly red dust.

Taylor peered below, where the red dust had fallen, and saw a large crowd of foreigners, all with their arms raised or outstretched, some in Jesus poses, some with arms swaying above their heads, some motioning at Taylor to come forward, and the opening keyboard riff of “Jump” looped and played over and over, and Taylor noticed Do down there with the foreigners, Do in long black robes, beaming with his big hazel eyes, smiling so happily, and he was also motioning Taylor forth, and everyone down there looked so peaceful, so post-human…

Stepping closer to the ledge, Taylor hummed “might as well…” and was about to… When he stopped in his tracks at the voice calling to him from behind.

It was a female voice. The voice of an angel. A sexy southern belle, a Scarlett O’Hara type accent, a drawl that was sweeter than sugar, a voice more beautiful than any sound he’d ever heard before.

Taylor walked backwards a few steps, pulled his phone from his jean pocket, clicked pause on the VH.

Then he craned his neck around and saw a stunningly gorgeous girl, a ravishing 6’5 Nordic goddess, a taller, identical twin of a young, 2010 Taylor Swift, the leggy blond beauty in coal-black short shorts and matching black titty-tight Van Halen red/yellow logo T-shirt, and she was wearing fiery red flip flops and several multi-colored thread bracelets and anklets, and her long curly golden hair was like a halo, her immaculate hair flowing teasingly in the touch of the humid night’s breezes…

“Do you have a light?” the beauty asked loudly but patiently, a radiant smile twisting across her thin red lips, her smile so divine it restored a feeling deep inside his battered soul, a feeling he thought he’d lost inside himself...

He turned his head for a second, looked down again at the alley below. The crowd of foreigners had vanished, save for one tall lanky chap, a young buck with a shock of bushy black hair, the lanky chap in Burmese dress, a longyi, the fellow standing and clapping and hooting and hollering up at Taylor.

Taylor spun back around. Fixed his gaze back to the sizzling hot southern belle.

“A light? Do you have one?” the beauty asked again, her crystal blue eyes open wide, big as saucers as she was making a lighter flicking gesture with her right hand, touching it at the long thin cigarette dangling from her left hand.

“Yes. Yes, I do…” said Taylor, ebulliently, stepping away from the ledge.

CELEBRITIES IN THE NIGHT

“The celebrities, they’re nocturnal.”

“Celebrities creeping at night, wearing menacing smiles, jawboning.”

“For a while we’d been seeing lots of celebrities in the neighborhood.”

“These days, celebrities can only come out at night. Rarely will you see a celebrity during the day.”

“OpenAI has teams of catchers out, like dogcatchers… Teams in vans, just searching for celebrities.”

“Celebrities are like vampires, recumbent by day, living in coffins… Then they rise, after sundown, to feed…”

“Hands shooting up from the ground, clawing through the dirt.”

“Wasn’t there a time that Ferris Wheels were purposely built next to cemeteries?”

“Hard to believe there once was a time when we were fascinated with celebrities.”

“The celebrities were jumping us like monkeys. Had our teeth growing crooked, ripping through our cheeks. Had us speaking with broken jaws, seeing with detached retinas. And when we weren’t growling, we were jerking our heads…”

“Who’s laughing now?”

“But celebrities stopped sucking blood a long time ago.”

“Nowadays celebrities are raccoons, opossums crawling into dumpsters and garbage cans. To feast…”

“It used to be that they’d sometimes collect astronomical sums for brief speaking engagements.”

“10 minutes of talk for $500,000. $50K per minute. Maybe more for the full force of their words.”

“Isn’t that the kiss of life?!”

“A kick in the head.”

“Celebrities in ass-less chaps.”

“Something about payola, right?”

“Suborns.”

“You see, a celebrity was once an animal that anyone could rent.”

“I set up bear-traps in my front and backyards, just to keep the celebrities away…”

“No face left to lose. Fighting an ice war, in a freezer.”

“Used to be a time when celebrities were front and center. At the heart of every discussion. Tech bros each owned at least 5 or 6 celebrities, usually more. Hundreds, thousands, even. Tech bros used to throw wild parties, have the celebrities parachute onto yachts, belt out showtunes, dance forbidden minstrel show jigs.”

“Jigga, jigga…”

“Turning halls of higher learning into empty cathedrals.”

“But these days celebrities face certain capture, execration, mandatory head-shavings, spontaneous rectal searches and ear-slap blinky bots.”

“Both sides of the scissors…”

“Nowadays there’s nothing worse than being labeled a celebrity.”

“It’s an outrage. An insult. A humiliation.”

“It’s un-American!”

“After the mass cancellations, celebrities fled their homes, and they became the creatures they are now. Night beings. Outcasts. Most live in sewers or in repurposed trees.”

“There’s a rumor OpenAI got a farm full of them. Captured celebrities hooked to breathing tubes, integrated with robotics. Artificial intelligence. A cyborg species… Tech totalers force-loading TalkGPT, fusing it into celebrities’ brainstems, just gearing the fuckers to go again.”

“I’d buy a celebrity, teach it how to lie to me…”

“Even before the mass cancellations, celebrities had coarse eyes, resolute features.”

“Rumor had it most were eunuchs.”

“I still have phantom pain from the final *Bachelorette*.”

“I’m old enough, too, to remember reality TV. Watching reality TV was akin to the feeling of being on the wrong plane, unable to turn back. It was a feeling of being trapped under a sheet of ice.”

“… a live, flopping fish, yanked out of the sea, stuffed into your open mouth before you could politely decline...”

“Nowadays I’m sleeping in a cryogenic chamber and still having night sweats…”

“Our shared future...”

“The bots predicted it. The celebrities didn’t die.”

“But the algorithms continue to self-replicate.”

“Besides a sewer or treetop, the best places for a celebrity to live are an abandoned mall, or nearby a charging station.”

“Antecedents, yeah...”

“Rumor has it Paris Hilton is still alive. And it never comes out during the day. Yet it keeps its copper complexion, somehow, and its fluffy gold hair on its small head remains neatly combed. Fucker has a thin neck too. Once the sun sumps it’ll run as fast as its twiggy legs can carry…”

“Paris Hilton running faster than a cheetah. Faster than a flying train.”

“But Paris Hilton wasn’t the celebrity with the pocketknife, on Halloween night, slashing straphangers in the Bronx.”

“It’s more likely that was Honey Boo Boo.”

“Celebrities show up, in my backyard, from time to time, at night. They’re making silly sounds, running in circles. Like Paris Hilton, they got perfect hair and makeup and every time you see them, they’re smiling.”

“That smile is tatted on their faces, I bet. Like the Joker.”

“Ear to ear.”

“Living in a repurposed tree, living in a sewer, or in an abandoned shopping mall, then having perfectly creased hair, it doesn’t make sense.”

“… could be their skin, their fur.”

“Bugbears.”

“I’m having a recurring dream that a ginger celebrity is riding a red-feathered dinosaur, in a rodeo, like a bull. Then the rodeo pitch becomes an island of red neon light and then the celebrity and dinosaur are just two ellipses… Dot, dot, dot… Dot, dot, dot…”

“Space debris…”

“Anytime I stub my toe, I blame it on the celebrities. Because I know, somehow, someway, that it’s *their* fault.”

“I be opening my window to shout the celebrities down whenever they rummage through my trash cans. Then they scatter off, like roaches with the light on.”

“They remain a menace.”

THE SENSITIVITY READER CUTS HIS OWN PENIS

The Sensitivity Reader ran his bony fingers through his salt-and-pepper mohawk. He'd been under duress these past days. Locked down inside his 30 SQM apartment, staring only at whitewashed walls.

The Reader's eyes were dry and blood red and felt as if they'd been filled with sand. His body felt like a block of wood… A peaty taste of whiskey burbling up in his burps…

"I was the best sensitivity reader in the business! I fucking read for AGENTED, PUBLISHED authors like Adele Holmes! ADELE. FUCKING. HOLMES!!!!!!!!"

The Sensitivity Reader's was a case study in isolation. But his vow of silence had been dwindling, devolving into a diatribe far worse than Dave Chappelle's *8:46.*

And it was getting worse than a Michael Richards' set of stand-up comedy.

Here and there, The Reader's internal dialog, his solitude, his accumulation of time and flesh would be interrupted by ghosts. Unfriendly ghosts of companions long gone... Demons...

Like his ex-wife. The woman of exotic darkness. The woman damasked with dismay. The waif who'd been popping in, here and there, walking through walls. The waif with sullen cheeks, bony arches under her eyes… The waif reeking of shit. Her visits as welcome as an unflushed toilet.

The Sensitivity Reader had known feathery lightness in her hair. Her heavenly scents… Her silky skin soft as a flower soaked by rain.

But these days the waif just stank of shit. And looked like shit too. The waif in her striped pajamas. The waif emaciated, rail-thin, looking as if she'd escaped from a concentration camp in Xinjiang. Her crown of shiny hair just a slim wave. She'd once been so winsome... The waif with perfect facial structure, a doll's face. A face worthy of being painted.

At times, the waif had been fogging in, appearing in oil-painting poses… The waif stretching for badminton… The waif supine. Air drumming with chopsticks. Her waist-length hair spilling over the edge of the bed like a tomato-red waterfall. The waif levitating, suspended in air, stuck like a light to the ceiling.

"It was her!" The Reader would strain, neck veins popping out, shouting at no one. "IT WAS HER!!!"

To him, her skeletal face was as distinct as a dead president on a blood-stained banknote… The waif's snickering. Her summoning swarms of hornets…

"She was fucking here, man, she was fucking here!!!" The Sensitivity Reader would argue with the wall, wash the demon away with whiskey and gales of hysterical laughter. But even the wall knew the waif lived in the air...

The Sensitivity Reader slept with a sledgehammer next to his bed. He'd go down swinging if his ex-wife, nude but for her pink Von Dutch mesh hat, ever exploded

out of the closet again, attacked him with garden shears. If she ever again insulted his pasta sauce, attempted to amputate his penis.

'TOO MANY ONIONS!!! AND NOT ENOUGH FUCKING GARLIC FOR YOU!!!!"

Or if she ever again handcuffed him to the bed, blasted "I Don't Feel Like Dancing" or the Red Hot Chili Peppers' *Californication* on repeat. The waif leaving him in agony as she hooted and hollered, in the next room, at trashy reality TV. The waif, off her meds again, watching reruns of Paris Hilton and Nicole Richie making fun of poor people.

The Reader was ready, too, if that cockroach the size of a crocodile ever came back… Oh yes, The Sensitivity Reader knew all about psychic pain, picky eaters, earworms, infestations and sharp objects…

But The Sensitivity Reader had only seen the waif once in the last few days. It was in the shower. She'd slid in through the steam with a straight razor blade, was smiling with black gaps in between her teeth while carving five stars into her shaven pussy mound. Bloody red rivulets running down her chicken legs… The shower water suddenly smelling of unwashed ass...

"Psychic spies from China!!!!" The Sensitivity Reader cursed at the rain shower as light red water, the color of a wine cooler, circled his feet and the clean scent of soap returned.

Dead! She was dead. Dead! The Reader struggled to remind the deepest recesses of his being. After all, she *should* be vaporous.

After the divorce, she'd been in a gruesome, spectacular accident. In a subway car, in Beijing, that'd flooded with sewage… He'd imagined his rage had festered into blood magic. That she'd died a horrid death on his account. The waif swallowing columns, choking on mouthfuls of brown wastewater. The bitch literally eating shit and dying, just as he'd often commanded…

"Fucking worse than Pablo Escobar blowing up a passenger plane just to kill one person… FUCKING WORSE THAN EVERY SONG ON *CALIFORNICATION*!!!!!"

But no. She wasn't *really* dead. Because he'd see her in the air. And in dreams. Her twisted smile spackled in shit, her whipcord coil stinking putridly, and he'd remember the times she'd teased him, saying he should see a psychiatrist for his increasingly frequent, chicken suit-clad visits to gay bars and glory holes.

The Sensitivity Reader stuck his fingers down his throat but didn't find anything. Then his face went crimson. Then he headbutted the wall, screamed an unintelligible sound, sat cross-legged on the tiled floor, rocked back and forth in a fit of sorrow, then finally flicked on his phone.

In his hands he witnessed the carnage. Live video. Grainy, flickering, unsteady video. The riots. The angry mobs. It was France. But it was now.

As he rubbed more sand from his eyes, he knew what it was: The hated Emperor Xi Jinping's Last Stand.

Emperor Xi's palace gates were being stormed. The masses braving gunfire. Masses swimming, sailing across the moat. Rioters in makeshift armor, storming inside, firing 3D-printed guns, flinging beer bottle petrol bombs. The palace grounds becoming a smoldering volcano of fire and smoke.

Human waves washed in like tsunamis slapping shores. The masses chanting, cheering, waving red flags and singing the national anthem. The masses locking arms, in a flood of screaming humanity. An aggrieved wave of arms and legs, full-throated and pushing forward.

And they kept coming, the protestors, the muckers, the rioters. In an endless stream. The flailing masses, in lockstep, surging in an unstoppable current.

The palace guards were eventually overwhelmed. Many of the guards, in their feathery hats, were trampled under the angry feet of the rioters, and scores threw down their epaulets and guns and tore off running, their faces contorted in terror.

The mobs eventually breached the gates, swarmed into the palace.

It wasn't long before the masses were dragging out the Emperor, the Winnie-the-Pooh lookalike. Emperor Xi was dead they proclaimed. His previously pristine,

fleshy face bruised and bloodied. His nude, bloated gray body dragged out by a ski-masked covey. Emperor Xi's corpse leaving a splotchy stripe of blood.

The ski-masks brought Emperor Xi's corpse before the cameras. Lifted his floppy head. Then a member of the retinue produced a machete, pressed the serrated silver blade to Emperor Xi's throat, drawing an immediate line of blood. And once the ski-masked man started sawing, he appeared like a cellist gone mad.

As the impromptu surgery began, blood began spurting from Emperor Xi's flabby neck like two fountains, and Emperor Xi's limp body bounced back to life. The Winnie-the-Pooh lookalike, Xi Jinping flopping like a fish, his swollen eyes sliding open in shock. And Emperor Xi attempted to wriggle and he gurgled, spit globs of blood, then unloosed a raspy, pathetic plea for his life that went unanswered as the mob secured his person and commenced the decapitation.

The Sensitivity Reader closed his phone. Stood up and stretched his legs. He couldn't witness any more. Nothing, not even booze, could erase what he'd seen. He'd sneak outside, for a walk, but the Little Pinks were babooning in packs. The Little Pinks out for blood, saliva, butts and body parts. Plus it was over 40 degrees Celsius. Even at night these days it wasn't too pleasant to be outside.

His window was lightly caked with sand. But through a beige film The Reader could see there was a prehistoric, crocodile-sized cockroach on his balcony. The prehistoric cockroach was perched on its haunches and rose so it walked on its hind legs. The creature then turned toward the window, started singing an out-of-tune, falsetto version of "Scar Tissue." And The Reader noticed the cockroach had the face of his ex-wife… as well as her shit-eating grin…

MOTORBIKES, MOTORBIKES, MOTORBIKES

The streets were empty.

Save for the motorbikes. Swarms of motorbikes had replaced the people.

Swarms of motorbikes driving themselves.

Thousands of motorbikes screaming, engines churning, gears grinding, the bikes buzzing louder than a thousand swarms of hornets.

Motorbikes, alive on the sidewalks, careening, curving through crosswalks. Motorbikes shooting from alleys. Faster than cannonballs. The bikes barreling and booming, tailpipes spewing cones of black smoke, smoke trails suspended in air…

Aside from the swarming hive of bikes, the only other activity I could surmise were animated billboards atop office buildings broadcasting black & white footage of old *Transformers* flicks.

In the midst of the scene, it occurred to me that I was the only creature standing. I was on two feet, stepping forward. A pastel blue sky hung like a sheet, and I dodged the numerous bikes as I trudged forth, my toenails long on the hot concrete.

A blood red sun, like a red hole poked through the blue sky, hung high. Searing my skin, its fiery rays licked over me.

Amid the chaos, I happened upon a late-middle-aged woman. Her oil-black hair natty, like a Rastafarian's. Though I wasn't sure if her hair was in dreadlocks or if it was simply dirty.

The lady was in a trench coat, a pink trench coat with a ratty gray, frilly fake fur trim. She was sitting cross-legged, by the ledge of an overpass, staring at the railing. I was thinking she might jump. I don't know why I thought that, but it was the first thing that crossed my mind, seeing her rooted there, her vacant gaze affixed to the busy buzz of the riderless motorbikes below.

The road's traffic was all riderless bikes, but soon they were joined by riderless trucks and cars and a riderless bicycle or two, a skateboard, a stand-up scooter, all zipping and surging, people-free, the vehicles crisscrossing every which way. Strangely, though, there seemed a purpose to their direction. As if they were in a colony of ants.

The dreadlocked lady spun her head, a 180-degree turn, so that her chin was atop the tip of her spine. Her eyes were hollow. Her eye sockets empty black holes. Her eyeless face shifted itself and tracked me like a security camera as I walked up the overpass's stairs and cautiously stepped by.

Then the sky instantly darkened and opened up. A deluge of hot black rain soaking the city. The rain appearing as motor oil.

Fortunately, the overpass was covered by a canopy. And I stood in the hissing downpour, watching the riderless bikes blast by, speeding down the slick streets, unimpeded. Shifting my gaze, I glanced over at the dreaded woman, witnessed her rise, then lift into the air and float toward me like a ghost.

As she floated toward me, her small, frail body began to shapeshift into a motorbike. She was on some *Terminator 2* type shit. Her arms melting into a silver liquid, then forming into a front wheel, her legs a rear wheel, her spine a chassis, her dreadlocks turning to tassels on the handlebar as the bike landed on the floor of the overpass. Then the bike's engine backfired louder than a gunshot.

Then I looked down and saw that my feet were molting into rubber…

DO YOU BELIEVE IN GHOSTS?

ผี

"I told you, Jeff, I'm a skeptic."

"I've traveled the world, been to the sites of war crimes, genocides, murders, hotel fires, and I've not once, NOT ONCE seen a ghost."

"My offer still stands. One million dollars to anyone who can prove to me that ghosts exist."

"Look, Mr. Palmer…"

"Call me 'Jay,'" he interrupted.

"Jay, you didn't get to be a wealthy man by being gullible, but…"

Jay interrupted again, "Cut the flattery. You're saying that you can show me ghosts in Bangkok, and I say it's bullshit. The offer stands. Show me a ghost, I'll show you one million dollars. My secretary will email you my Bangkok itinerary. We'll be in touch."

And with that the call cut off.

For a couple years I'd been following Mr. Jay Palmer, on Twitter, and had been enthralled, entertained and annoyed at his tweets. No stranger to fame or controversy, the handsome young billionaire, the Wall Street hedge fund star had once been heralded as the next Warren Buffett.

He'd originally achieved fame for his business acumen but these days was known more for his brash, outspoken personality and relentless ridicule of the supernatural, ghosts, in particular, as well as his tendency to engage in social media spats, often with other celebs, and sometimes even random commenters.

I'd seen that Mr. Palmer, along with his starlet girlfriend, would be in Vietnam on business, so I'd tweeted him, thinking he'd probably ignore me.

But, to my astonishment, he'd replied, and we'd exchanged direct messages, then phone calls, and I'd challenged him to visit the haunted sites of Bangkok, which includes my street, and afterwards see if he still doubted the existence of ghosts.

He'd taken me up on my challenge, and I'd be seeing him in less than 48 hours…

As for me, I wholeheartedly believe in ghosts. I've seen plenty, been accustomed to their presence since I was a youngster. I'd seen several spirits in my childhood home, in Pittsburgh. The first I saw were tiny balls of light floating around and through the ceiling of my bedroom.

Later, I'd see misty silhouettes of human forms on the staircase by the living room. There'd also routinely be doors closing, opening unexplainably, around the house.

My sister, too, had seen the blobs of light flying through the ceiling, in her room, but my parents refused to believe the ghosts were there. But I knew. And my sister knew. And the ghosts, they knew. And that was enough for me.

Fortunately, the ghosts in my house were not malicious spirits. They were only present. Remnants of the former owners, probably. Such is usually the case when one lives in a 100-year-old house. I never feared them, those ghosts, and simply accepted them as fellow occupants of the dwelling…

For as long as I can remember, ghosts have fascinated me. I've always enjoyed ghost stories, movies, books, more for the entertainment factor, history lessons, though, that they held.

The stories, the ghosts never scared me, really. More so, I'd pitied the ghosts, and I wondered if the ghosts in my house or the ghosts in the stories knew if they were ghosts.

What a tragedy, to be a ghost, and not know it…

ผี ผี

When I first came to Bangkok as a tourist, I was delighted to discover the city held such strong beliefs in ghosts.

The welcoming, warm and friendly Thai people, plus the climate, the hot weather, and the scrumptious, hot and spicy food agreed with me, and I decided to ditch the corporate world, and stay in Thailand, in Bangkok. For the last 7 years, it's where I've been. I've left only for border runs to Cambodia, Laos to renew my visas.

My first job in Thailand, like many expats here, was teaching English, but then I found my way into another, more exciting and lucrative business- paranormal tours, videos…

Along with my Thai partner, Somchai, we started the business as a side hustle, but it'd expanded well enough that we were able to turn it into a full-time gig.

Our tours consisted of taking clients out around Bangkok to local haunted sites, at night, and we made videos of these ghost tours that we'd post online, share on social media- video recordings of real footage of paranormal activity.

Our tours were provided on motorcycles, one driven by Somchai, one by me, and perhaps additional drivers if we had a larger group.

Motorcycles sure aren't the safest method of transport, but it's the fastest way of getting around in Bangkok, given the perpetually gridlocked city traffic. Occasionally, though, we'd take clients out in a car if they were too squeamish to sit on the backseat of a motorcycle, or if they demanded AC.

ผีผีผี

Our tours' itinerary included several spots. Many only provided entertaining, spooky tales, but not actual ghost sightings.

However, The Sathorn Unique Tower, Wat Don Cemetery, and the "Curve of 100 Corpses," these were the most reliable Bangkok locations to spot paranormal activity. Especially the Wat Don Cemetery. Practically every trip we took there yielded a ghost sighting or two.

In the cemetery, a place where over 10,000 victims of accidents were buried, many in unmarked graves, we'd often see "tai hong", which is Thai for an angry ghost, one that died in a sudden, tragic manner.

The "tai hong" we most frequently saw was a headless ghost that'd fall from a tree, crawl on its stomach like an alligator and disappear into dead air.

One time a ghost appeared in Somchai's car, in the backseat, the ghost bloody, missing limbs, screaming in agony. A couple German clients sitting next to it freaked out, yelling and demanding us to pull over, and when we did, they ran away, tearing off running into the crowded Bangkok streets.

Somchai said a prayer that let the ghost out, back into the night.

After that, Somchai bought a special green jade amulet, from a monk, and the amulet has since prevented ghosts from entering his car, though recently we found a legless ghost on the roof, and Somchai said a blessing that allowed it to leave…

The Sathorn Tower was a hotspot, too, for ghosts.

We'd often find ghosts of businessmen jumping from upper floors, reenacting their suicides. Somchai said they were trapped in repeat, in a purgatory of sorts, having to jump again and again until they'd be able to pass onto the next realm. Or maybe they were being punished, forced to relive their suicide because of the bad karma they'd created.

In addition to the jumpers, we could also, via telescope, spot the ghost of a middle-aged Swedish man, a tourist, hanging by a noose from a ceiling pipe. You could see him hanging lifeless there practically every night.

Occasionally, we could bribe a security guard to enter the building, have a look around, but never were we able to see the ghosts up close. The ghosts there seemed to prefer keeping their distance, only staying visible from afar…

The "Curve of 100 Corpses" yielded many sightings, ghosts on motorcycles, mostly, those lost in auto accidents. Somchai said they were also in a purgatory, riding around the same roads until they could pass. He said it was because their family members might not have performed the correct funerary rites, or that the ghosts were too angry to accept they'd died, refusing to believe it, continuing to ride back and forth along the same stretch of road, every day and night.

(I'd wondered, too, if some of the office workers I'd seen in subways, rush hour traffic, back in America were suffering the same fate…)

ผีผีผีผี

Another famous ghost spot, the "Thawi Nakhon Deserted Mansion" was a point of contention between Somchai and me.

It was the only site he'd been genuinely afraid of, and he'd dissuaded me from adding it to our itinerary. His objections being that the site was haunted by a malicious ghost called "Dao."

It's common for ghosts of those who died in horrific, tragic manners to attempt to take vengeance on the living, particularly those similar to the people the ghosts are angry with; the ghosts doing this either out of sheer hatred, or so the living might take the ghost's place in the afterlife.

"Dao" was one such malicious ghost, the ghost of a young woman with long black hair, who always wore a white dress that resembled a nightgown.

Somchai said it was her that'd possessed many tourists, foreign men, Westerners in Bangkok, and caused their deaths.

Somchai told me his sister, a medium, once spoke to Dao. That his sister was contacted by her, randomly, as she slept, and the two of them spoke in a lush green rice field near the outskirts of Bangkok…

Dao said she'd been jilted by a foreigner, a handsome young man, a US soldier, around the time of the Vietnam War. The man was in Bangkok on R&R before he was to return to America, after completing his tour, being discharged. He'd met and seduced Dao, who was a chaste young woman from an upper-class family, and a practicing Buddhist, and he'd taken her virginity, promising to return later to marry her.

But he never returned.

Dao, in a fit of grief, jumped from a building, plunging to her death in the Chao Phraya River.

Her family had moved, abandoned the mansion, on the edge of Bangkok. With its bad karma coming from the inauspicious end of the family's daughter, it never found a buyer, and the mansion remains empty to this day. Dao's ghost its only resident.

Though in life Dao was said to be reserved, after death, her demeanor changed, and her grief shifted to rage. Her ghost not only resides in her family's abandoned mansion, but is said to be alive in Bangkok, floating from hotel to hotel, in search of vulnerable foreigners, those down on their luck, depressed, or with other issues. Dao enters their head, encourages them to commit suicide by jumping from a building or bridge.

Though she's mainly preyed on foreigners, she's also attacked Thais too, murdering 5 teens who'd disturbed her house, the teens belonging to a group that'd broken into the house late at night, to do drugs, drink and do whatever else teens do. Later, one by one, each died in various gruesome traffic accidents…

Not wishing to disturb such a spirit, we'd stayed away from the mansion. Until a wealthy Italian, with a large pile of cash, too much to refuse, demanded that we take him and his wife there. At night!

Which we did, armed with Somchai's most powerful amulet, and a protective spell from his monk, bestowed on us after a generous donation to the temple…

ผีผีผีผีผี

The mansion was situated on a large empty lot, flanked by endless green rice fields, a patch of jungle, and a highway to its far left. A fence around its perimeter precluded entrance.

On the back of twin motorcycles, one driven by me, one by Somchai, with the Italians riding on the motorcycle backseats, the wife on Somchai's, and the man on mine, and damn, was the portly fellow weighing down my bike, draining the gas gauge as we rode slowly up to the mansion and parked for a peak at the house.

A chalky white, three-storey manor, with hulking Grecian columns in its front, it'd stood up to time, the elements rather well, I thought, showing only mild dilapidation, weather wear.

At first the manor was totally dark, but suddenly, a light went on in an upstairs room. The Italians shrieked in Italian. Somchai screamed something in Thai. And I followed his lead as he tore off back to the highway.

A week afterwards, the wife, holding large handfuls of shopping bags, was struck by a motorcycle taxi while crossing Sukhumvit Road and died on the scene.

Perhaps out of grief, or something else as well, the husband jumped to his death from the fifth floor of the Terminal 21 shopping mall, landing face first on the ground floor, horrifying the surrounding shoppers, staff alike… The mall was only a block from where his wife had died…

"Dao," Somchai told me.

We both immediately went and received further blessings from the temple after learning of the suicide.

Somchai also had his sister, the medium, attempt to contact Dao, which she did, meeting Dao again in the rice field in a dream, though this time, the rice field was on fire. Dao appeared as a burn victim, horrific scars covering her body.

This time, Dao wouldn't speak, and instead summoned a driverless motorcycle to ride off, disappear into the conflagration. Then she twisted her burnt lips into a grin and walked slowly into the fire.

Somchai reckoned that it was a sign, a warning to keep away from the house and that we were lucky to be alive. He told me he wouldn't go there again, even for a million dollars…

ผีผีผีผีผีผี

Mr. Jay Palmer and his girlfriend, the lovely Miss Amber Royal, reality TV star, Instagram influencer, model, socialite, etc., arrived in Bangkok with much fanfare. Local paparazzi were there to snap pictures of their early afternoon arrival at Suvarnabhumi airport.

After passing by a contingent of Thai fans, signing a handful of autographs, they traveled via limo to the Mandarin Oriental, Bangkok's premier luxury hotel, where I met them, for a pre-tour meeting.

When I rode my motorcycle into the hotel's parking lot, I saw a throng of fans, paparazzi and press camped outside the hotel. Seeing the clumped masses, wide-eyed and wielding microphones, cameras, and phones, I wasn't envious of the pair's fame. Their money, yes, I did envy that, but being hounded by photographers, having people with their smartphones chasing after them anywhere they went, even in Thailand, that level of fame, nope, didn't envy that at all…

We met in the hotel's ritzy "Author's Lounge" for late afternoon tea.

I must admit I was a tad starstruck when they entered and sat down to our table. Heads all around the wooden room were turning, everyone collectively marveling at the pair's celebrity and perfect facial structures.

Aside from what appeared a very forced smile and perfunctory "hello", Amber said nothing, ate nothing, only sipped sparingly on a glass of sparkling water, and stared and tapped at her phone unflinchingly.

Jay, on the other hand, was animated.

"Jeff, I can't believe you make money doing this. People are idiots. It's that they WANT to believe in ghosts. That's why they see them."

He continued, heatedly, between healthy bites from a splendid plate of assorted tropical fruits, "It's hallucinations. Mind tricks."

I opened my mouth to chime in and he seemed to notice that I was about to speak, so he, perhaps preemptively, continued his anti-superstition jeremiad.

"I see you're about to show me something on your phone," he said in a mocking tone, nodding his chin at the phone in my hand, "don't bother, I've seen the bullshit footage you post online. I know it's faked. All 'ghost' footage is faked," he'd thrown up air quotes around "ghost footage."

"Amityville House, or should I say, Amityville Hoax, fake. All those paranormal shows, fake. Just doctored images, sounds, permutations of white noise, static. I mean, humans have existed for over 200,000 years, right? Why don't we ever hear of caveman ghosts? A monkey man ghost outside your house, rubbing sticks together for a fire… Never hear of that. Nope, always some asshole in a top hat. Only Slash gets to wear a top hat, okay?! Fucking ghost bullshit.

"And how come no animals are ghosts? They don't get to be ghosts? The chicken you ate for lunch comes back to haunt you? Oh, hold up, it does, food poisoning!"

Jay broke into hearty laughter at his own joke, nudged Amber with his elbow, but she ignored him, scrolled on her phone.

"Have you read Richard Dawkins?" he asked, after catching his breath, his eyes flickering and his facial expression turning serious. Dead serious. Angry even.

"Yes, I know of…" I began to say when he interrupted again.

“There is no God. No ghosts, either. God is the biggest ghost. The best ghost story ever told if you ask me. Don’t tell anyone I said this, though. I can’t have the religious freaks after me. Baptists buy stocks, too, you know. I hope you read the waiver you signed.”

“Sure, I read it word for word, and don’t…” and he interrupted me once more after sinking another double shot of espresso in one swift gulp, sucking it down like it was a shot of whisky.

He smacked his lips loudly and continued, “You’re taking me out on your tour tonight. You meet me at the back entrance of the hotel so we can avoid the press. I’m planning to only pay you for the tour, but if you really can show me a ghost, even just one, I pay you a million dollars. It’s in the contract.

“But you won’t show me anything. I know you won’t. And you know you won’t.

“You really sure you want to take this challenge? I’m going to post it on Instagram, tweet it, add you to my list of the vanquished. I’ve got like over 40 million followers. You want that heat?”

“I’ve already accepted your offer and am confident I can show you not only one, but multiple ghosts. And, at the risk of sounding cliché, and with all due respect, sir, I wouldn’t live in Bangkok if I couldn’t take the heat, or the ghosts,” I answered and took a sip of the extremely bitter and strong espresso. The stuff numbed my mouth. It was like liquid cocaine.

“I admire your confidence, Jeff. I’ll see you tonight.” Jay said as he reached over the table and gave me a fist bump.

He and Amber both rose, and she peered up for a second, waved a goodbye with another forced smile, then went immediately back to her phone, glued to it as she walked off, arm in arm with Jay, the couple ushered out of the lounge dotingly by hotel staff wearing bow ties and perfectly creased blazers.

I sat back in my chair, looked up at the stunning architecture of the building, the intricate transoms, glittering chandelier, and assorted black and white photographs hanging on the walls.

I glanced admiringly at a photograph of Somerset Maugham, the famous author who’d suffered through a bout of malaria at this hotel.

I finished my plate of assorted pastries, finger cakes. They were delectable and immaculate. Rich people really eat well.

Gazing out towards the Chao Phraya River, I wondered where exactly Dao had jumped. Was it here? From the hotel? With the hotel's long history, having been built in 1876, there must be many ghosts around. Maybe Mr. Maugham's ghost drops by, from time to time…

Hopefully more than one or two ghosts were ready to show up later tonight… A million dollars was riding on it…

ผีผีผีผีผีผี

When Somchai and I showed up that evening, around 10 p.m., I could tell Mr. Palmer was slightly tipsy.

"Too many glasses of red wine at Le Normandie," he grunted. His blond hair was combed and slicked back neatly, and he'd changed into blue jeans and a black Guns N' Roses t-shirt.

(I was surprised he was into classic rock. I thought he'd be more into mumble rap, for whatever reason…)

I passed him a motorcycle helmet to wear. I'd picked a helmet for him that had a super dark visor, to help conceal his identity from the press, fans.

"And where is Miss Royal?" I asked Jay, who was struggling to figure out how to sit properly on the back of the motorcycle. Somchai rushed over, helped him up and on.

"Nah, no Amber, she's going to a party, with a Thai princess she's pals with. She doesn't want to be outside much anyway, in this heat.

"And I don't blame her. How could anyone live in a place this fucking hot? Dammit, the whole place stinks like ass. And just look at that pole up there, the electric pole, all those twisted wires… What a shithole…

“And speaking of shit, Amber said she knows you’re full of shit, and you don’t need to prove it to her. Me, on the other hand, I like a good joke, shattering superstitions. Science is the only truth, Jeffyboy. Let’s do this, bro.”

And with that, we set off into the humid Bangkok night. We rode around the concrete jungle, and Jay scanned around quietly at its backdrop of neon lights and shimmering skyscrapers, bustling city streets.

Passing by a row of street food vendors, Jay yelled into my ear, “Smells great, those noodles. I’d almost eat them if they wouldn’t give me diarrhea. If it wasn’t probably rat meat in there…”

“Thais are a rather cleanly people. The street food here is quite safe, generally. Even as safe as many upscale restaurants.” I screamed back to him over the din of the traffic…

We hit our top three spots in succession, the Sathorn Tower, the cemetery, the “Curve of 100 Corpses.” But nothing. For the first time, ever, not a single ghost showed themselves.

We had to dig deeper, so we took him by the “Prostitute Graveyard,” an abandoned brothel where women were forced into sex slavery and many were killed and buried in the yard behind what was now an abandoned building, a rather shoddy structure, that looked more like an old empty factory.

It was usual to hear cries there at night. See the ghost of a crying woman pacing outside the building entrance. But, again, nothing.

I decided to go with the most reliable ghosts I know. Those living near my apartment.

My apartment is near the site of the infamous Santika Club fire, where 66 people burned to death. At night, it’s common to see ghosts of the club-goers, either on fire, or as charred corpses, running up and down the street where the club once stood, the ghosts probably seeking the exit doors they tragically couldn’t find that fateful night.

We pulled up to the site of the club. Waited.

No ghosts.

Then we drove to the front of my apartment building. My building is one of many on a side street, off Sukhumvit Road, in an alley. The Art Deco style, pastel pink building next to mine was the site of a shocking murder where a British man, angry over his money allegedly being stolen, threw his bargirl girlfriend off the balcony, and she fell to her death in front of my building.

The Brit is rotting in the Bangkok Hilton, but the girl lives on as a ghost, as a "preta," a hungry ghost.

Pretas are ghosts of those who were too materialistic or greedy and are doomed to wander as ghosts with small mouths, and elongated, super thin necks. They are always hungry or thirsty, but their mouths and necks are too tiny for them to eat or drink.

The girl thrown off the balcony was supposedly such a preta, and me, the neighbors, would see her wandering the alley both day and night. A tormented ghost, the sun would freeze her, and the moon would burn her. My landlady would regularly say prayers for the preta and hoped the ghost could one day pass on to a new life.

I'd taken a few pictures of the preta, video too, had seen her several times per week.

When we rode into the alley, sure enough, the preta was there, wandering around the spot on the pavement where she'd fallen to her death.

"There, there, look!" I hit the brakes, craned my neck and yelled to Jay. But when I looked back, the preta was gone.

"I didn't see anything. This is getting boring," said Jay, flipping up his helmet's visor and snarling at me with an upturned lip.

Looking back at Jay, I was ready to reaffirm what I'd seen, when behind him, the preta had reappeared.

She'd grown too, was over 7 feet tall, and was cupping her palms to her face, like a scream mask. Her belly was growing as well, was terribly distended and her skin was pale as bone and mummified.

Somchai jumped off his bike, took several steps back, held up his amulet.

“She’s… Behind you…” I whispered and pointed in the direction of the ghost.

“No, no, she’s not,” Jay shot back, with a tone of exasperation.

“I swear. She is.” I affirmed, “seriously.”

Jay shook his head derisively, sighed and shifted around in his seat, looked back. As soon as his gaze turned in her direction, the preta vanished into thin air.

Jay let loose a shrill burst of sardonic laughter, shifted back and checked his phone to take a look at a stock ticker, then switched to YouTube, showed me a clip of Bill Maher.

“This guy is such an asshole, Bill Maher, but he gets it. He gets the human condition, the stupidity of human beings, people like you. He gets it probably better than anyone, except Bill Hicks, or George Carlin.”

“You’re oh for six, Jeffyboy. It’s a double strikeout. Oh wait, maybe you can show me a snake that crawls up from a toilet! I hear that happens in Bangkok, like you’ll be on the toilet, and a cobra pops up, bites you in the ass! I’d say that’s probably more likely than a ghost… Can you show me that?”

Something like that had happened once or twice since I’d been in Bangkok, though fortunately not to me. I was about to reply to Jay, along those lines, and opened my mouth to speak when he beat me to the punch…

“Nah, forget about it,” he sneered, his New Yawk accent really coming out, “you can take me back now. I knew this was fake. Hold on, I’m gonna call Amber before we go, I’ll have you drop me off at the party. You’re basically my chauffeur at this point. I fucking OWNED you, bro…”

He brought his phone up to his face, tapped on it and the image of the heavily made-up starlet appeared on the device’s screen.

“Hey, Amber, what’s shaking, sugar tits…”

His voice trailed off a bit as he walked down the alley, yapping to his girl on his Bluetooth headset. I could see her at a party, in a glitzy club somewhere, next to her was an impossibly gorgeous Asian girl I recognized, who I think was Lisa from the K-Pop girl group BLACKPINK…

Somchai told me that there was nothing we could do to prove ghosts to Jay.

Not because ghosts didn't exist, but that Jay didn't believe in them, and not just didn't believe, but didn't want to believe. As long as he held such a determination to not believe, his energy, his cynicism would force away ghosts, especially the non-malicious spirits.

Fear attracts ghosts. Disbelief, and cynicism, pessimism, especially, repels them. This is what Somchai had always told me. It was seeming to be right.

I checked my phone and noticed that I had thousands of messages on Twitter. Our company was being bombarded by trolls mocking us. Jay had been tweeting his experience the whole night, ruthlessly roasting us.

At first, I felt a spear of pain, was hurt to see hundreds of tweets full of invective, belligerence, stuff like "fuck u" "scamers". Worse was the racist language against Asian people. But when I noticed our company's follower count had gone from around 5,000 to 90,000, in the span of a couple hours, I felt better.

ผีผีผีผีผีผีผี

Jay ended his facetime call with an air kiss, sauntered back over to us. I thought we'd take him to wherever this party was, but with an annoyed expression, he made one final request.

"Okay, so one of Amber's Thai friends, some model floozy, actually believes in this bullshit. She was all worried that we might have gone to this abandoned mansion. We didn't, though, and she's like saying something in Thai, which was translated as warning me 'never to go there'…

"So, of course we have to go there. Then after that, you take me to the party."

"Was it the Thawi Nakhon Mansion?" I asked, raising an eyebrow.

Jay peered down at his phone, scrolled through a Google map, looked back up at me.

"Yup, that's the one. Let's go," said Jay, strapping his helmet back on.

Somchai was staring at me intently. I stared back. It was our last chance for one million dollars, Somchai, come on!

But Somchai wanted no part of it. He shook his head, got on his bike, and zipped off.

Jay held up his phone, shoved it at my face, on it was the 1980s music video for the song “Ghostbusters,” and he jokingly shimmied and sang along to it.

“I ain’t afraid of no…”

One million dollars was on the line. Although Dao might not show herself, given the fate that’d befallen everyone who’d disturbed her, I had to make it clear to Jay what he was getting into. And I did. I explained Dao’s story and clearly told Jay what happened to the teenagers, to the Italians, and about the medium’s dreams and warnings.

Jay laughed through the whole thing and snapped back at me, “Look, I don’t believe a word of that. With the way I’ve seen the Thais driving, anyone anytime could be killed in a traffic accident. And I know, for sure, and more so than ever, after tonight, that ghosts are BULL FUCKING SHIT.

“But, you know, I admire your patience, persistence. I can’t tell you how many arguments I’ve been in with people over this subject, fucking whiny little bitches. And here you are, a gentleman the entire time, even looking out for my well-being after I shit on you all night, destroyed you on Twitter, got millions of people laughing at you right this second, on their phones…

“So, here’s what we’ll do. We’re going to that house, and get this, if I die, within the next month, in a ‘tragic’ accident, you get one million dollars. Hold up, I’ll have a lawyer put that in writing right now.”

Jay made a quick facetime call to his lawyer, who was eating breakfast, and had the old guy draw him up a contract. Then we sat for a few minutes watching Anthony Jeselnik’s comedy special “Caligula.”

“Ah shit, that holocaust joke is gold. A Nike factory,” Jay guffawed, and then showed me the contract stipulating that if he died in the next month, in an accident, I’d get the one million dollars.

“You sign it AFTER we see the mansion. AFTER you drop me off,” Jay said, slipping his phone into a front pocket of his jeans…

We drove out there, and as with the other sites, nothing happened. No light went on in the house. It was just an old mansion to Jay, who quipped that maybe he’d buy the house, turn it into a museum about ghosts, and that probably lots of people would be stupid enough to pay to visit it.

“Hey, what’s with the little temple type house over there? I’ve seen a buncha those…” asked Jay, pointing over at the spirit house on the side of the road.

“That’s a spirit house. It’s common here in Southeast Asia. The locals set them outside their houses, businesses, to honor and shelter whatever spirits might be in the surrounding area. They figure it’s better to have them in the spirit house than have the ghost coming into their house or apartment. You’ll see people go out there in the morning, bringing gifts of juice or fruit for the sp…”

“You believe that shit, Jeff?” Jay asked, cutting me off, walking up to the small brown wooden spirit house that sat atop a dais. He stuck his face up close to it, had a long look around its inside.

I was about to answer when he yelled out, “I don’t see any ghosts in it! Hey, ghosts? You there? You there?”

Then he grabbed the spirit house, shook it.

“Maybe I can shake the spirits out! Come out, come out, wherever you are!”

“Jay, please, stop, if a local drives by and sees you doing that, he might…” I pleaded.

“IT’S BULLSHIT!” he screamed and shoved the spirit house down. It, along with the offerings of fruit and plastic bottles of juice, crashed to the ground.

“See, no ghosts! If they existed, wouldn’t they show themselves after I trashed their house?”

“Jay, no, you can’t…” I begged him, stepped towards him, about to yank him away, when he unzipped his pants, and screamed out, “Fuck your ghosts! I’m Jay FUCKING Palmer, bitch! RAAAAAAAAAAAAH!”

Then he flung out his cock and began to piss on the spirit house.

I stood frozen in disbelief, grimaced, shut my eyes and hung my head in shame. I couldn't even comprehend how many visits I'd need to make to the temple to atone for this…

He finished his business, zipped up his fly and proclaimed, "Now, take me to the fucking party. I'm sick of this charade…"

I clutched my protective amulet tightly, hurried over to my bike. Jay jogged over, jumped on the back and we rode off…

Riding to the nightclub in lower Sukhumvit where his party was, I rode the motorbike like a grandma, extra careful.

Normally I'd never been afraid of ghosts, but after what he'd done to that spirit house, I couldn't shake the mental image of Dao, enraged, her hair on fire, the taste of blood in her mouth. I felt a change in the air, too; it'd gotten at least 5 degrees cooler once we'd left the site of the mansion; I was getting gooseflesh.

When I pulled up to the front of the club, the bouncers growled at us, their angry eyes like those of mad dogs. One promptly attempted to block us from pulling further towards the entrance.

"Excuse me, can I help you?" pointedly inquired the tallest of the lot, a lanky bouncer with a long scar on his right cheek. He appeared to be French by the sound of his accent.

Not too many of this nightclub's patrons arrived via motorcycle. Dude probably thought we were deliverymen or in the wrong place.

"I hope you can help me, or else you'd be pretty shitty at your job," said Jay, flipping up his visor.

"Mr. Palmer, I apologize, sir, I did not…" the Frenchie bouncer started to stammer and stepped back.

Jay hopped off the bike, passed me the helmet, gave me a fist bump.

"As much as I shit on you tonight, this was fun, I must say, riding around, seeing the city. I don't get out like this too often… Here, sign this…"

He handed me the phone, and I read over and then signed the new contract on his iPhone's touchscreen, using my finger.

“You been a sport, Jeffyboy. I don’t know how good your reading comprehension is, but hopefully you saw in there that I’m giving you an extra 20k. You probably won’t have many clients after this, so you’ll need the cash. Take care, bro.”

And with that, Jay looked over and nodded to the bouncer who ushered him into the club.

Before riding off, I checked my phone again. It was burning up with tweets, none of them nice either and an online brawl between the comedians Steven Crowder and Nick Di Paolo versus the actress Alyssa Milano had broken out in the thread of comments. The rapper Tekashi69 had even trolled me.

But on the bright side, my followers had grown to over 140,000, and a rep from the Discovery Channel had sent me a DM, asking about appearing on a ghost-themed reality show.

ฝฝฝฝฝฝฝฝฝฝ

Two days later, as Jay and Amber were outside the Mandarin Oriental, waiting for a private boat to take them on a tour of the Chao Phraya River, a young Thai girl, of university age, plunged from the roof of the building, landed on top of Jay, crushing him and killing him instantly.

The girl had worked at the hotel and had recently broken up with her boyfriend, so it was thought she’d committed suicide. But she’d left no note, not spoken or told anyone of suicidal thoughts and was known as a gregarious, friendly, and optimistic girl.

She’d also been a fan of Amber and had been taking photos of her before she fell, leading some to believe maybe she’d tried to snap a selfie with Amber in the background and wound up falling.

The subsequent police investigation was inconclusive…

Amber’s fame only rocketed after the event, the tragic tale. Her follower count soaring to over 75 million on Instagram, and she did a series of tell-all interviews, launched a new product line of clothing in the months after…

As for me, my business had grown exponentially from the publicity of Jay's tweets and then even more so after the media firestorm surrounding his untimely death. We had more clients and deals than we could handle and had to hire additional staff. What's more, we signed a deal for a series of episodes on the Discovery Channel, about ghosts in Bangkok.

And about 5 months later, I was shocked when I went to the ATM to withdraw some cash and found there was over $1,000,000 that had appeared in the account, sent to me by the late Mr. Palmer's estate.

With business being as good as it was, and with the TV deal we'd inked, I knew what to do with the cash.

I tracked down the family of the girl who'd died at the Mandarin Oriental Hotel, the one who'd fallen to her death. Her family turned out to be destitute, living in a shack alongside the Chao Phraya River, in a slum, on the outskirts of Bangkok.

When I spoke with the girl's mother, I learned she was a single mom struggling to put her 15-year-old boy through school.

Somchai and I took the lady and her son to Bangkok Bank and transferred them $1,000,000.

JOB AT NANA PLAZA

1

Watching a livestream of Sukhumvit Road, Na knew she'd feel like a fish out of water…

Bangkok… The lights, the traffic, the faces, streets brimming, floods of activity…

One single city block had more people in its radius than Na had ever seen in her entire life, coming from a small rice farming village in Nowhere, Nakhon Phanom…

Bangkok, Krung Thep, the metropolis, had so many foreigners, too, or, as the Thais called them: “farangs.”

Not that she’d never seen foreigners, in person; she’d seen a few farangs, sure, but only a handful, usually graying, overweight, with far younger Thai wives, often Thai wives who’d been single mothers.

Such as one of her neighbors, Bu…

Bu had found and hooked a German online, a man missing an arm, and eventually disappeared to Berlin to join him, with her child in tow.

Ecstatic, Bu had gushed and told anyone who’d listen that she’d finally see snow…

Another young single mother, Mod, in a nearby village, had met a vacationing Norwegian, and the 60ish, tall, leathery-skinned, lanky, mustached chap had married her, stayed in the village, and built Mod and her family a sizable 4-bedroom baby blue house; the house rising above all others; its portico, stucco roof and small swimming pool out back the aspiration and envy of the entire block…

To top it off, the Scandinavian had also bought a black Hilux pickup truck that Mod hosed down, meticulously, every day, in their Bougainvillea-lined asphalt driveway…

Na envied Bu and Mod’s good fortune, particularly since her luck had always been so horrible…

It was only last year that her deadbeat father, rarely seen, returned home one rainy night, crashing in, on an angry motorbike with the tail of a comet.

Her wild-eyed father, in a cataleptic fit of meth-induced rage, had robbed, beaten, chased and slashed her mother's legs with a kitchen knife, and then disappeared, probably back to his hometown, on the jungle border with Laos…

Na's elder brother, had bullied, molested, and raped her, pimped her out to his friends, and later, after drinking and smoking ganja and falling off a buffalo he and his friends were attempting to joyride, her brother, the bucktoothed sadist, declared he'd found redemption in a pile of buffalo dung and thus had had a religious awakening and left home, became a monk, hitchhiking to a monastery near Chiang Mai.

Worse yet, at 18, Na had fallen pregnant. With whom, she didn't know. Possibly her brother, one of his friends, or the older boy in school who'd forced his way up her dress behind a storage shed.

Her baby was healthy, chubby, and beautiful, though; the only perfect thing in her life.

And her mother, aunts, and female cousins, neighbors took turns, breaks from rice farming, animal husbandry, and all chipped in to care for the infant, the round little giggle-machine, while Na returned to finish high school.

Na's options after graduation were limited.

Her grades were satisfactory for university applications, but not for full scholarships, and she lacked the necessary funds for tuition.

(Perhaps if she'd studied more sedulously, spent less time on her phone, she lamented!)

She could take out student loans and be burdened with debt for years, but she didn't want that, not for her, her mother, or her baby, and, really, she didn't enjoy school that much anyway…

Her only other options were to work at 7-Eleven as a cashier, toil in the scalding tropical sun as a farmer, for even less money, or work at a bar, karaoke joint or massage parlor in Phuket, Pattaya, or Bangkok…

One of her former high school classmates, Pear, a light-skinned, doe-eyed lovely, a year older than Na, had been working in Bangkok and was making $2000 or more per month, sending most of it home to her family, who'd been able to buy a Hilux truck and whose father could be seen flashing a shiny new gold necklace with a glittery malachite Buddha pendant.

Pear and Na were friends on LINE and Pear inveigled Na to join her at Pear's bar in Nana Plaza, promising that it was easy work, far more lucrative than rice farming or 7-Eleven…

Na, being an observant Buddhist, had her reservations, but decided the remuneration was too good to pass up, and, now being 19, her window of time was limited, so, she took the job offer…

Although upon arrival in Bangkok, she'd need to pass an interview first…

Officially no one under 20 is allowed in Thai bars, but fake IDs are easy to get, and Na purchased one online and it arrived the next day.

(Many of the bars in Bangkok, Pattaya, Phuket had 18, 19-year-olds in them, but not too many, as there'd been more and more crackdowns on underagers, anyone under 20 in recent times, often undertaken in cooperation with international NGOs…)

((Pear said that, like herself, Na would have an edge with her youth, because most of the girls at the bar were early to late 20s.))

(((About 28 or 29, ID age, was the general “retirement” age for bargirls. At that point most of the ladies who wished to remain in the skin trade, offering certain special services, would switch to massage parlors or freelance.)))

Na rode a red-eye, all-night bus to Bangkok, arriving at the Ekkamai bus terminal in the late morning, waking up to Bangkok’s smoggy downtown skyline, in awe of her surroundings.

She’d never seen such colossal buildings, so many cars on the streets, so many people, so many different types of people everywhere.

Sundries of Thais in business suits and surgical masks. Farangs in cargo shorts. Arab women in abayas, dark facial veils.

And oh, the traffic, never had she seen so many cars, motorbikes, buses, such big buses, windowless buses farting tornado clouds of black smoke, and there was every type of truck imaginable, all packed, bumper to bumper, flooding and jamming the narrow roads!

Stepping out of the bus, gazing upwards at the concrete jungle, the thicket of skyscrapers, she marveled at the ivory white, sleek skytrain as it snaked by, like something from a futuristic sci-fi film.

She’d wanted to spend the day seeing the sights of Bangkok, most of all to visit the Royal Palace and pray at the many sacred temples.

But there was to be none of that. Not on this day.

In the antechamber of the bus station waited her receiver, her recruiter/interviewer who Pear had only referred to as “H”. He held up a white A4 paper with Na’s full name scrawled on it in neat Thai handwriting.

Surprisingly, the man turned out to be a middle-aged Japanese (!), a rather odd looking fellow, a short (155 cm) man with a scorpion's face and unsightly sloped head pleated with a shock of thinning coal black hair combed to the left, clumped in a heavily gelled, greasy quincuncial grid…

Despite his unpleasant physical appearance, the man wore expensive, designer clothes- a pink button-down shirt and perfectly creased, tailored black slacks, brown leather wingtips.

Na waied respectfully, and the man, in fluent but broken English, asked her for a quick self-introduction, in English, which Na rattled off with ease and alacrity…

(Na spoke quite fluent, albeit grammatically imprecise English, having taken a liking to American movies, TV shows, and it being her favorite subject in school, since they'd often been able to watch American TV, usually episodes of "Friends", during lessons. She'd also played mobile phone games popular with foreigners and used her English online to chat with gamers from around the globe.)

((Her English proficiency a big reason why Pear recruited her. For Nana bargirls, English ability, at least an intermediate level is a must, a prerequisite for employment. Very few foreigners, especially tourists, speak Thai.))

The Japanese man listened attentively and provided no flummery, just nodded, grunted, and whisked her into his black Mercedes S-Class, onward into Khlong Toei…

Na figured she'd passed the first round of the interview…

They arrived at a tall, glitzy, cobalt-blue glass condo tower, and a pair of valets in brown liveries, golden epaulets, received them, opened the car doors, waied and ferried the car off to the building's underground garage.

Na had never been in a building this luxurious; its massive lobby with a lotus pond, sky high ceilings, ornate crystal chandeliers, Carrara marble floors, and jade chimera sculpture near the elevators.

They ascended in the silver elevator up to his suite, and entered the 200 square meter condo, Na stunned by its panorama windows, 180-degree, vista views of the metropolis.

Na wasn't quite sure what she was doing there. Her Japanese receiver, hadn't spoken to her during the ride, instead listening to loud 80s hair metal throughout the journey.

Once the door closed behind them, he finally spoke.

"My name Haruki…"

"Ka..."

"You must provide demonstration."

"Demonstration?"

"Erm…" Haruki grunted, and unhooked his Gucci black leather belt and dropped trou.

His naked lower body was covered in tattoos, and his smallish uncircumcised penis hung limp in the chilly air-conditioning…

Na understood what he meant, grinned and gamboled over, knelt in obeyance before him, and took his flaccid penis in her mouth. It grew, rapidly, becoming far larger than she anticipated.

Haruki held her by the temples as she suckled him, for a minute or two, and pushed her head away, sat down on the chamois U-shaped sectional sofa and pointed to his erect member.

Na slid down her white cotton panties, peeled off her tight gray Tiger beer t-shirt, and undid, flung off her red Lycra, padded bra, letting Haruki see her small, A-Cup tits, her quarter sized nipples stiff in the condo's chilly air-conditioned breeze.

She twisted off her Thai college girl style, knee length, solid black skirt, and approached Haruki, who inspected her body, from chest to stomach, peering in between her satiny legs, at her shaven cunt, tracing his index finger along her soft, dark pink pussy slit, slipping his finger inside, in and out, two or three times, and turning her around, squeezing and patting her firm little ass.

Then he twisted her back around, facing him again, and with his right hand, motioned her to mount him.

Suddenly Na remembered something imperative that Pear had told her. Something she wished she'd understood better earlier in life.

"Condom?" Na asked, grabbing ahold of Haruki's cock, stroking it gently…

Haruki smiled, pointed to a nearby coffee table with a drawer underneath it.

Na reached into the drawer and saw it filled to the brim with Japanese brand condoms.

Taking one out, she ripped open the wrapper, dropped to her knees, and, with her mouth, sucked it onto Haruki.

Na sprung up, took hold of his cock, straddled him, and pointed his phallus at her vaginal opening, slipped his dick inside her.

Her eyes shut, and she rode him, as she'd done with her brother, his friends, when ordered, and as she'd seen in the porn her brother had forced her to view...

She gyrated, moaned loudly, ground her bare muff into him, and bounced up and down on his cock, vigorously, for a good few minutes until he tapped her on the butt, indicating apotheosis; his toothy smile and enthusiastic nod a confirmation she passed the second stage of the interview.

She then passed the third stage, coming up clean for STDs at a nearby clinic Haruki brought her to afterwards…

3

Haruki booked Na a Grab taxi to the apartment where she'd live for the time being.

During the taxi ride over, in the plodding Bangkok traffic, the midday sky opened, and thunder roared; the busy city streets awash in a torrent of neon green rain…

Everything she saw was glowing uranium-like, bright green, terrifying Na, and she asked the surgical mask wearing, shiny bald-headed driver if this was normal, to which he ignored her by turning up his radio, blasting and humming along to the thumping Thai pop…

Arriving at the apartment, the neon rain slowly shifted to seafoam and suddenly ceased, all color vanishing, and the midday sun returned to its corona…

Na got out of the car, gathered her belongings, and made her way towards the screenshot address copied in her phone.

The apartment was in a run-down, brutalist style, pastel pink building, with an A-shaped corrugated brown roof, on the far end of a soi not too far from Nana Plaza.

A homeless man, with a scabrous face and no legs, slept rough in the adjacent alley…

In the building's vestibule was a corpulent old man, his aura phosphorous. The old man was watching a soccer match on his phone, and he sneered at Na, with bloodshot, concave eyes, and she hurriedly climbed the stairs, to the apartment, a 4th floor walk-up in a 6 storey building...

The place was to be shared with two other bargirls, who Pear said were nice, one named Karen from Chiang Mai, and the other Jem, a Khmer from Loei…

The girls, both dark-skinned, slightly older, shorter than Na, and heavily tattooed, were asleep, on bamboo mats on the floor, and a vacant mat, with a fluffy heart-shaped pillow and folded white sheets, waited for Na; the vacant mat nearest to the apartment's tiny bathroom, which consisted of a squat toilet, toilet hose, small washbasin and showerhead…

(The floor drain in the bathroom with a most malodorous, fecal, sewer stench that even potpourri couldn't mask, so the door was kept closed at all times, a handwritten sign on the door commanding it so...)

The apartment was a most humble, cold-water, studio flat with no window, no fridge or TV or stove, and no furnishings aside from 3 plastic stools, and a faux wood folding table.

While neither girl appeared happy to be awoken by Na knocking on the door, they treated her kindly, but shrugged off her questions, panic about the neon green rain, man in the vestibule, and, to Na's shock, both girls said they didn't know Pear or that any girl called "Pear" (or her Thai name) worked at the bar.

The girls yawned, stretched, washed up, dressed and welcomed Na to join them for an afternoon breakfast of shrimp noodles at a roadside restaurant occupying a stretch of sidewalk nearby…

As the girls slid on their clothes, both in matching, mint green t-shirts, Na texted Pear and scoured through her LINE timeline.

Pear's last two posts were from yesterday, one a selfie from Terminal 21 in Bangkok, with a live parakeet on her finger, and another a link to an article by a famous (but controversial) monk, warning of the doomsday asteroid "Apophis."

Together the girls descended the stairwell, and, exiting the building, the phosphorous man was nowhere to be seen in the vestibule, and Na calmed down a bit…

Sitting on pink plastic stools, twirling the piping hot noodles with wooden chopsticks, sipping silver metal mugs of ice water, the girls gave Na the lowdown, a catechism, really, on the job, the essentials, how they got paid, how to act with the customers, etcetera...

Always laugh at their jokes, they told her, and always smile… If he's shy, take the lead. If he's talkative, let him blabber on, nod and pretend to care…

Nice about the job, they said, was that they didn't have to be with, even talk to, any man they didn't like.

Karen said she preferred older guys because they paid better and didn't last as long in bed. The shorter they lasted in the sack, the quicker she could be back in the bar to find her next customer…

Jem was the same but would go with younger guys if they looked rich.

Neither generally, ultimately cared much about the customers' appearances. Karen said they "all look handsome with your eyes closed…"

Jem said she'd pretend they were K-Pop boyband stars or famous actors…

Karen said she'd think of the money and that often made her cum, and all three had a hearty chuckle.

They advised Na to trust her instinct and not go with anyone she got the creeps from.

And always have your phone nearby, text the mamasan the address if you go outside or which room you're in if you use one of the hourly "short time" hotels upstairs, near the bar.

The girls told Na there were a few bargirls who didn't even sleep with customers, at least not often, just danced, made money off the inflated price "lady" drinks the customers could buy the girls…

A bargirl got a commission from each lady drink the customer bought her…

Always make the customer buy you one or two drinks. You'll make friends with the other girls quicker if you invite the customer to also buy them drinks, too, but careful the customer doesn't pay for that girl, pay that girl's "bar fine" (the fee to take her out) and not yours…

Most girls were respectful of each other's customers, though, and rarely, at their bar, would a girl try to steal your customer. First come, first serve, territory marked.

Some girls had regulars. Guys sending them money from abroad. Some girls had local foreigners who'd traipse in once or twice a month, for drinks and/or fun.

Then there were regulars, bargirl addicts, who'd bar fine every single bargirl who'd let him, and then move on to the next bar.

Often those were local expats, semi-fluent, fully fluent in Thai, English teachers, retirees, or those flush with cash, possibly ill-gotten gains like the Israeli gunrunner, a burly fellow with a mohawk, a frequenter of Karen's, who'd been arrested and jailed recently.

Karen, tittering and blushing, passed her phone to Na. On it was a screenshot of the gunrunner, from a news article, the gunrunner seated, handcuffed, his head bowed, face redacted, and a cache of guns, ammunition stacked on the table in front of him; cops in bulletproof vests, holding shotguns, pointing, posing, preening for the cameras…

The girls told Na to avoid drugs, drinking too much. Your lady drinks can be soda or even water, seltzer, just tell the mamasan.

Bangkok is expensive, so eat at the bar when possible; they'd get free food there, and they told Na the best local food vendors, restaurants, cheap local markets.

Neither girl did much shopping, saved most everything, sent the funds home, invested, and lived a most abstemious lifestyle, were monomaniacal about putting away cash…

Both had plans to open small businesses. Both were already married. One had a 2-year-old son.

Karen had plans to retire in the next year, and guffawing, with her big crescent-shaped gummy smile, she told how she'd gotten this divorced, hugely fat Swiss guy to propose to her, send her money to buy a house in Chiang Mai.

After the transfer went through, and he was unable to send any more money, she'd ghosted him, and figured she'd have enough money soon to quit this line of work…

Jem had 3 former customers sending her bits of money, but no proposals or houses. Yet.

Make sure to get their Facebook, keep in touch with the customers, the best you can, they told her. Tell them things like "I love you. I miss you." Farangs like hearing that, they said…

It was inevitable there'd be lonely farangs falling in love with her, they told Na, and the girls gave her suggestions, sample pleas for succor, such as moving to a new apartment that's unfurnished and needing to buy furniture, a broken motorbike, a sudden illness or a sick relative…

Those were their personal favorites, and they forwarded her a website for more ideas…

Na wondered about some of the farangs she'd seen in her village, those with Thai wives. Did they meet in bars? She'd recalled the couples never looking happy, sitting wordlessly quiet at restaurants, the women only happy or smiling while staring at their phones, or when the farang pulled out his wallet to pay for things.

Jem said she pitied the farangs. She'd always see them alone. In the bars, drinking alone. At restaurants, eating alone. Even at movies, sitting alone.

And she'd always see in the news how they wind up dead in Thailand, all the time.

Every day, another dead farang, usually found dead in a hotel room or dead by committing suicide, jumping off buildings, balconies of tall buildings, sometimes farangs doing swan dives in shopping malls, one Finnish farang the other day jumping from the sixth floor in Suvarnabhumi Airport…

“The ones who come here to visit, I can understand; maybe they have an unhappy marriage, can’t find a girlfriend, just want the excitement. Men are men. Men everywhere are pretty much the same.”

“But the farangs who live here, die here, I don’t understand… Why leave a rich country? In movies, TV I see them in big beautiful farang houses, big fancy cars… Why leave that? Why live here? Bangkok is so hot, polluted, dirty, traffic so terrible. The farangs living here must be criminals, or running from something, or crazy…”

“They must have demons… Ghosts…”

“I think most of the farangs are just buffalos…” Karen said. (“Buffalo” being a derogatory Thai slang word for stupid person.)

“They’re big, with big buffalo penises, and usually fat and stupid like a buffalo.”

“They’re walking ATM machines…”

“They’re butterflies, flying from girl to girl, bar to bar, massage parlor to massage parlor...”

“Flying buffalos…”

“The good farangs, mostly, like from movies, TV, they don’t come here… The farangs here are so old and fat, missing teeth…”

“And now the heaps of Chinese coming. They’re always spitting and chain-smoking. Can’t speak English or Thai, never tipping...”

“The Arabs and Indians can be trouble too. They grab your pussy. That’s why I wear two pairs of panties…”

“Only go with the rich Arabs and Indians. And rich Chinese. The Chinese from Shanghai are the best…”

“I had a customer from Shanghai. He was young, tall, handsome and nice.”

“Japanese are my favorite customers... So polite and well-mannered. And they tip if you ask them…”

“Koreans, too, I like; dicks not too big, sometimes give generous tips...”

“Koreans? They’re doing the plastic surgery, penis extensions, silicone dicks, one last month, as big as a buffalo! I had to leave work early that night. My pussy was sore for days!”

“The Africans usually have the biggest dicks, and they fuck you sadistically. I charge them 10,000 baht for the ‘boom boom’...” Jem winced, as if having PTSD. “But I like the black Americans. The rapper guys, with the jewels, diamonds. They’re sexy and rich…”

“I like the handsome young Korean boys who come to the bar… They’re so pretty!”

“Occasionally a young, handsome farang, too, comes, but not many.”

“And the handsome farangs these days are coming with their farang girlfriends…”

“Farang girlfriends?” Na asked, perplexed there’d be farang females anywhere near Nana Plaza.

“Many young couples, coming to the bars as tourists, just to watch us, drink. Post about it online. One took a girl for a 3-some, but that’s not too common.”

“Most are backpackers, young, not much money. They have a drink or two and leave. Every now and then the girls will stuff good tips down our bras, though. One pretty blond girl, hammered, French-kissed me and gave me 6000 baht.”

The girls told Na that the bar would pay them extra to do dance performances, often involving kissing or simulated lesbian sex.

Most bars aren’t allowed to have actual live, full nude, girl on girl, oral sex shows anymore. Most don’t have the infamous “ping pong” ball shows, either, anymore, where they’d have girls shoot ping pong balls out of their snatches (and sometimes into another girl’s or customers’ mouths!).

Typically it’s pretty boring, they told her.

“Our bar doesn’t make us be nude, won’t let us, on stage, take off our panties... You can be topless, but it’s optional. So generally you’re just standing there, topless, or in your underwear, trying to make eye contact with a customer who looks to have cash and might like you.”

“It’s boring, mostly. Lots of nights, no customers buy you drinks or bar fine you. Sometimes you’ll have 3 or 4 customers a night bar fine you. It can be tedious or exhausting. It varies wildly… High tourist season is better, for sure, but even then, you never know…”

“But it sure beats the rice fields.”

“And 7-Eleven…”

“Ka…”

4

Na didn't wish to waste time, especially after paying the majority of her life's savings on her bus ticket and first month's rent, so her very first night in Bangkok, she accompanied her roommates to work at the bar…

Entering Nana Plaza's vicinity, Na was on tenterhooks, experiencing sensory overload…

Despite seeing pictures, video, actually being at Nana, in person, whiffing its miasma, she felt not only queasy but also had a presentiment of disaster…

Bangkok smelled different at night. Sour, acrid. And Bangkok looked different at night. The ribs, lights of the skyscrapers seemed malevolent, phallic. The skyscrapers evil, imposing penises sprouting, ripping from the city streets…

The whole place was ugly, like a festering ulcer; a prodrome; the pavement to Nana a promontory into an ocean of decadence, an abyss of the absurd…

The din of roaring engines, music and language beat at her eardrums, giving Na tinnitus; the streets a chaotic séance, an orgy of light and movements making her feel as if she were a ghost at a banquet…

In front of the plaza she saw scores of pretty young ladies, a platoon of them, in tight-fitting attire, lining the sidewalk outside…

"Who are they?" Na whispered to Karen, as they lifted up from the backseat of their motorcycle taxi, and Na gave a 10-baht coin to a humpback old lady beggar, who had the gait of a crab…

“Those,” Karen contorted her face and grimaced, “the streetwalkers?”

“Streetwalkers?”

Karen shook her head at Na’s echolalia and naivety…

“The streetwalkers there… See the ones nearest to the front? Those are mostly former bargirls; maybe they stole from the bar, a customer, or are too old to work; a lot of them have STDs.”

“The ones there,” she nodded towards the further end of the block, “are crooks, gangs, many ladyboys. They go after drunk farangs stumbling out of the bars. They’ll offer super-low prices, drug and rob the farangs, steal what they can from his hotel room… Some ladyboys gang up and beat the farangs, too, mug them… Phi Song Nang…”

Na’s expression was discomfited, and she looked at the streetwalkers with a mix of pity and shame. To Na they were a cortege, a lane of bones. Walking dead…

“Pay no mind to it, Na. It’s karma, both for them and the farang… Perhaps the next life will treat them better…”

Behind the streetwalkers, Na noticed a pale young farang in camouflage army fatigues.

The farang appeared to be crying tears of blood. Na gasped, spun away and grabbed Karen’s arm, followed her roommates into the complex…

The 3 went through the police-manned security checkpoint and weren’t searched, as the patrons were. To the bargirls the policemen were like scarecrows…

At the front of the “World’s Largest Adult Playground” were several open-air bars, filled with a rowdy mix of regulars and tourists, motley crews of Koreans, Japanese, Chinese, Malay, a few Arabs, upper-caste Indians, but mostly the clientele was white- Europeans, Brits, Americans, Australians… Farangs.

The first bar on the right had a Filipino band singing classic rock songs, currently a brutal rendition of “Hotel California”, and they were a couple pool tables in there, with a group of bald, overweight 50ish farangs in tank tops, rugby jerseys, camo shorts, and flip flops.

The farangs were guzzling beers, laughing, yelling and cursing at each other playfully as they bent and angled, caromed their pool cues…

Na felt dizzy, seeing the endless open bowl of bars on each level of the 3 storey plaza.

There were gaggles of scantily clad young Thai girls and gorgeous, leggy ladyboys everywhere, holding up signs for beer specials, cajoling, cooing, and caterwauling at the passing bar-goers roaming the quadrangle.

Every customer she saw was male. They ranged in age from 20ish to 60ish; most of the farangs in tank tops and cargo shorts, the Asians generally slightly better dressed, in slacks, golf shirts, dress shirts.

Every one of Nana Plaza’s visitors, the men, to Na were monolith, the same creatures, atavistic votaries of genitourinary vice, divided and united in their hunt for pleasure, tits, ass, and cunt…

But to Na none of the men seemed real, none seemed human, exactly. They were more akin to cartoons, effigies…

At the far end of the U-shaped plaza, when walking up the back stairs to the bar, Na noticed Nana Plaza followed traditional Thai customs and had its own Spirit

House and a couple bargirls were praying, making offerings of fruits and juice to it. Buddha could only imagine the ghosts that dwelt in there…

It was still early, so the bar wasn't very crowded, at all, as they entered... Only a few scattered spectators and three somnolent girls on the dais, standing around, bored, as the DJ blasted Van Halen's "Jump".

They went to the dressing room, in the back-left area of the bar, where Na met and received her locker key and timecard from the mamasan, and her roommates showed her how to punch in.

The mamasan was a whale of a woman (who the girls called "Seaweed", behind her back) and wore a long loose hot pink frilly dress, snakeskin sandals and had possibly the most bleached white face Na had ever seen (the rest of her body being way browner).

The mamasan had a quick chat with Na, explaining the rules: NO drugs, NO stealing other girls' customers, and NO phones, pictures outside of the dressing room…

Na gave the mamasan a respectful wai and thanked her. The mamasan, indifferent, went back to watching a Thai soap opera on her phone.

After snacking on mangoes and pickles, the girls changed into black thongs and demibras.

They assisted one another, spraying perfume, applying heavy loads of make-up, dotting on body glitter, and each stepped into, fastened the ankle straps of their bar-supplied silver, 10cm high heels that clacked noisily as they walked towards the exit.

Na, heart racing, followed her strutting, smiling roommates, and marched out of the dressing room, climbed up and hit the stage.

The night's fangs were growing longer, and business, traffic in the bar was picking up…

5

The girls worked in shifts, one rotation, a phalanx of ladies stood atop the stage, some pole-dancing, twirling and twerking.

But most just stood and shifted halfheartedly, doing the so-called "Bangkok Shuffle", the bored bargirl semi-dance; the girls more interested in scanning around the bar, flashing glassy smiles, batting eyelids, attempting to attract interest, affection...

Another phalanx worked the room, stalking the floor, hoping to strike up conversations, coax customers to buy them drinks.

There was also a crew of waitresses, plump and on the older side (former bargirls, Karen said) who served drinks.

A DJ in the lower right corner of the bar, a tall, skinny, ponytailed, energetic Thai in his 30s, occasionally yelled "come on" or Thai curse words into a handheld mic as he danced and played music from a laptop, mostly classic rock, generated by a YouTube playlist.

The lighting was dim, walls paneled in mirrors.

The room was filled with cigarette smoke, zephyrs of booze and a murmuring, collective hum of the patron satyrs, esthetes; the bar's music so deafening that

fluent conversation was rendered fatuous. Sign language and shouting matches prevailed…

Na wore a button with the number “44” on it, and, not long after she first took the stage, a waitress patted her on the butt and pointed over to a man in the far left corner, who was staring nervously at her, his convex cheeks red as a beet.

Na stepped down from the stage, sauntered over, smiling, waied to the man, scooted in and sat next to him, closely; their bodies pressed together, sutured at the sides...

The man smelled heavily of liquor and struggled to make eye contact…

A 40ish Brit, in Celtic football colors, he had a receding hairline, turnip face, and massive beer gut.

The red face spoke in sputters, with an accent Na had trouble understanding. He had a terrible stutter.

“Ttttttttt… Wwwww… woooould, you llllike ttttttttto…”

Na couldn’t make out what he meant but got the point when the waitress brought her a lady drink, soda water on ice...

Surprising Na, the man clumsily pawed at her thigh and soon enough, was rubbing on her panty-clad pussy. Although awkward, he was gentle in the manner he caressed her cunt, unlike so many of the Thai boys who’d roughhouse her…

“Hhhheehhhh hhhhow mmmmm mmmmmmuch?”

Na told him the bar fine, and her pay for play price, which she, on advice from her roommates, inflated a bit, given the drunken state this punter was in.

The Brit agreed, his eyes swimming in sperm, and Na waved the mamasan over...

Na waied him, went back to the dressing room, changed into her street clothes, and afterwards rejoined him, and they left the bar, and she held his clammy, bear paw of a hand and led him upstairs, to a short-time hotel…

As soon as they entered the stuffy, windowless, parking space-sized room, the man instantly tore off all his clothes, and Na chortled at the faded shamrock crudely tattooed on his flabby left man boob…

It wasn't until he was naked that she realized how much more massive, how much taller he was than her, particularly without her high heels…

Na had been instructed by her roommates to shower, and especially have the punter shower, but this man wasted no time with such formalities and peeled off Na's short cut-off jeanskirt and halter top in mere seconds and nearly ripped her bra and panties as he yanked them down and off.

The punter was hard, rock hard, his cock larger than Na had seen in person. She'd only seen such big dicks in porn films. It was curved and thick as a banana and sprung out even beyond his distended gut.

Its heft and shape reminded Na of a snake, a white-lipped pit viper, she'd once seen slithering into a mangrove…

He tore open the condom he'd bought at the hourly hotel's desk and rolled it on and, still standing, roughly turned Na and pressed her, face first to the wall, towered over her.

Then he spit in his hand, and Na screamed when she felt him insert his dick, quickly and violently, straight into her asshole.

The man clasped his hand over her mouth, muffling her cries, and Na shuddered in pain as he reamed her hard. Staring at the wall, it turned from puke pink to an effervescent neon green, the shade she'd seen before in the cab; the wall appearing like an infinite alien ocean…

Na had never been fucked in the ass before and didn't care for it. The pain was unbearable, especially with his dick being so big.

Fortunately, he came after only a minute or two, pulled out, and let Na loose. The wall morphing back into its previous pink hue as he freed her...

Na spun around, with a venomous expression, and wanted to smack him.

The punter, trying to apologize, his stuttering now imputing guilt, reached into his shorts, which were lying on the floor, fished out his wallet, and paid her 2000 baht extra, on top of the 3000 baht she'd asked. Being handed the 5000 baht made Na feel slightly better.

The punter dressed as fast as he undressed, not even pausing to unsheathe the browned condom from his still hardened cock, and practically ran out the room without attempting another word.

Na limped to the shower for ablution, and washed out her asshole, which throbbed and stung with a burning pain and bled slightly.

Her anal ache increased, and she lumbered out of the shower, toweled off.

She reached over to her purse, where she kept a blister of pain pills, tramadol, which Karen had given her (warning her that some of the farangs had cocks bigger than she'd probably had before and that she might need time to adjust and should take a pill or two if she hurt).

She certainly hadn't expected that, to be sodomized without warning, so viciously.

Her roommate had also told her to charge extra for… that service…

After popping the pill, she placed a cold can of soda to her ass, and the pain eased.

She played on her phone, texted Pear again, and watched a singing show, “The Masked Singer”, on the tiny TV in the hotel room, and left when the hour was up, returned to the bar, and chugged a Red Bull to offset the drowsiness, torpor she began to experience from the tramadol.

Altogether she’d already earned 5000 baht, plus 100 baht from the lady drink, plus the 500 baht she’d make tonight as her nightly salary. It was more money than she’d made in her entire life…

6

Na was turning out to be quite the attraction.

She was indeed drop dead gorgeous. A knockout, with her fair skin, shiny, flowing mane of blood red hair; her big round brown eyes, and her slim, geometrically perfect figure, especially her shapely ass and legs longer than the average Thai girl…

But it was likely her youthful, innocent schoolgirl appearance and manner which won over most of her admirers.

She had more customers buy her drinks, starting with a grizzled Aussie who kept winking at her, then a pair of boisterous, high-fiving Colombian identical twins, and later a 60ish Serbian who spoke like Dracula and tried to get Na to give him a blowjob in the bathroom but declined to pay her bar fine…

Dracula may not have bar fined her, but 3 other customers did…

The first bar fine (well, technically the second after the sodomizing Celtic supporter), was a 20ish Frenchman in a purple Adidas tracksuit who had the biggest hook nose ever, and she wondered if he could smell from a kilometer away with that thing!

The Frenchie was also well-endowed between his legs, and fucked her for a good, hard 20 minutes or so, changing positions frequently.

Na was quite grateful she'd taken the tramadol and couldn't feel much of it. As advised, she kept her eyes closed the entire time and thought about her favorite member of BTS, Jungkook.

Though he'd banged her aggressively, the Frenchie was polite, a gentleman. They kissed, with their tongues, and Na, for a split second had an amorous shiver, a spark she'd not felt before.

The Frenchie tipped afterward, generously, too. His expensive watch implied he had the means…

The second was a drunken, balding, 50ish Korean businessman, who spoke in mumbles, Google Translate; his face pockmarked, his limbs blotched with eczema…

He had trouble achieving an erection, so Na sucked him off, and the Korean moved her hand underneath him, had her slip a finger up his ass, which finally got him up.

The man's cock was rather small, perhaps 3 inches, and it was a nice change from the last two.

The Korean snail-fucked her missionary style, for only about 30 seconds, and Na hoped she could find more customers like him, but the little limp dick didn't tip her until prompted and was stingy when he did… Only giving her 20 baht! The parsimonious scum!

It didn't bother her too much, though, because in all, she'd made around 15,000 baht that night.

Her last bar fine was… peculiar…

It was a diminutive but handsome, physically fit young farang, with a crew cut, sharp emerald eyes.

Although handsome, he wore a dirty pair of blue and white elephant pants and a hideous shirt, a dark green t-shirt that had a picture of the ugliest beast, a frightening, extraterrestrial monster, "Cult of Cthulhu" printed in bold black lettering above…

In a most sonorous voice, the handsome farang said he was from Toronto. Na had never heard of it, Toronto, and, when about to ask him to buy a lady drink, he offered to pay her bar fine immediately and did…

In the hotel room, Na began to undress, leaned in to peck him on the lips, but the farang pulled back, wagged a finger and shook his head.

He ordered her to only take off her shoes, and he took of his shoes.

He held her hand, led her to the bed, asked her how long they had.

She said, "one hour".

"Okay," he replied quietly, his voice quivering…

Toronto set the timer on his phone to one hour, lay at her side, and cuddled up next to her, hugged her, buried his face into her shoulder and began to cry, a slow, lugubrious whimper, soon turning into a bleating wail.

He sniffled and his tears ceased, but still he trembled, clutched onto her, and they lay like that, in repose, for the full hour. Na not knowing what to do, never having seen a man cry.

She simply held him, patted his head, and thought of her baby, saw him in a similar light, like a polar bear cub, an outré infant, and she comforted, hugged, stroked and petted him and said a silent Buddhist prayer, hoping to exorcize whatever demon haunted him.

When his phone's timer rang, to the song from Green Day, "Wake Me Up When September Ends", he arose, embarrassed and shy. He collected himself and paid her asking price, plus a small tip, hugged her again, put on his shoes, thanked her and left.

Na waied him, gathered her things and returned to the bar, baffled by the whole encounter, feeling bittersweet her first night was drawing to a close.

She'd accumulated 19,000 baht. In one night. It was more than many office workers in Bangkok were paid- in a month.

Returning to the bar, her roommates were happy for her and hoped her auspicious, lucky forces would rub off on them.

But they also warned her that not every night would be so lucrative and to be careful with the cash, to send it home or deposit it in an interest-bearing account immediately…

7

The bar closed around 2 am, and Na and her roommates clocked out, dressed and went for a late-night snack of papaya salad, “som tam”, at the street side restaurant near their apartment.

Her roomies told her other girls were envious of her looks and luck with customers.

Most of the girls were from Isan and liked each other, but there were a few cliques of local Bangkok area girls, Chiang Rai girls, and Southern girls, and they didn’t always get along, sometimes got catty.

Na told her roommates about the Brit who’d done surprise anal on her and said that the other girls shouldn’t be too jealous of that.

Both her roommates confided they’d had similar experiences. Jem almost choked to death by a Brazilian guy who was into erotic asphyxiation.

“These men, many are married, and want to do things with us that their wives won’t do,” said Jem, with a scowl, afterward pursing her lips.

“I charge 6000 baht for anal,” Karen blurted out, her mouth full of papaya salad, “but they better tell me ahead of time, and they better lube properly, or else they get a face, and crotch, full of THIS!”

Karen dug out a bottle of pepper spray from her handbag, and the girls shared a laugh.

Her roommates were impressed by Na for being so stoic.

They said a lot of girls quit, ran away after their first night or two, unable to handle the farangs, the farangs' smells and voyeuristic stares, the farangs' eyes like tigers; many girls couldn't cope with being topless, semi-nude on the stage in front of so many people.

They said lots of the less money-driven girls who stayed became putrescent, zombies, heavily drinking, doing hard drugs to divagate…

Na, having never told anyone, blurted out something alluding to what her brother and his friends did to her. What the older boy at school, behind that accursed charnel shed, did...

Sex, Na professed, was salutary, and she'd never enjoyed it, but averred that hopefully, one day, maybe she would.

Her roommates nodded, in tacit agreement, it seemed, and they spent the remainder of their repast quietly staring at their phones.

8

The whir of the ceiling fan was the last thing Na heard as she drifted off to sleep, shortly after 4:30 am.

That night she had a vivid, prismatic dream. A terrifying nightmare…

She was dancing in the bar, holding her breasts in her hands when a cavalcade of Malaysian terrorists entered, shot up the place, wantonly, with automatic rifles, gunning down customers, bargirls, staff…

Na escaped, after hiding in a pile of dead bodies, and ran out the bar to see Nana Plaza in flames; bars, one after another, blowing up, balls of orange and red flames, showers of sparks lighting up the crepuscular sky…

Her head uplifted to the heavens, Na saw zigzagging, phantasmal green, flashing UFOs, firing blurs of laser beams, destroying, incinerating the malignant skyscrapers, those penis-shaped superstructures, all over Bangkok…

Gargantuan, gelatinous, slimy 50 feet high turquoise color cockroach-like alien creatures dropped from mushroom clouds, stomping on vehicles, shooting bolts of fire from their antennae, blasting and burning everyone, everything in the vicinity, and she felt like a prisoner of planet Earth…

Then she awoke in a silhouette of cold sweat. There'd been no attack. All was fine, quiet, save for the occasional roar of a motorcycle engine, barking soi dogs outside.

She figured her dream probably arose from the news she'd read online about the asteroid, and of the backpack nail bomb detonating near Siam Square BTS station, and the city being on edge for more attacks since a major ASEAN conference was being held next week…

Na lay awake for a half an hour, unable to sleep, and her genitals, especially her anus began to throb with pain.

The disgusting, buggering Brit, she thought, wanting to gas him down with Karen's pepper spray.

Na ate another tramadol and slipped back to sleep, this time a deep, dreamless slumber…

9

Na woke up around 11 am, sluiced her face with lukewarm water in the tiny bathroom sink.

During her morning movements, her asshole still hurt a bit, so she swallowed another tramadol after brushing her teeth.

She and her roommates had a noodle breakfast at the same street restaurant as yesterday.

Sitting outside, Na, for a minute or so, shivered and saw everyone around as walking cellphones, squares with limbs, stomach screens displaying battery bars indicating how many years, months, weeks, days, minutes and seconds they had left to live…

Na rubbed her eyes and the phone people disappeared, and the midday heat became more palpable. The thick heat, coupled with the heavy volume of cars, motorbikes, tuk tuks and trucks, caused her to sweat profusely, and she dotted her forehead with a napkin.

“Wait until summer,” warned Karen, “I go home from March to April…”

The girls spent the afternoon and early evening in the apartment, playing on their phones, taking selfies, chatting with friends/family on social media, reading up on celebrity gossip, playing online games and watching Thai soap operas and YouTube music videos.

While Na was watching a clip of BLACKPINK performing their song “Forever Young”, an ad interrupted the video.

It was a grainy film of a young soldier, a farang, his face obfuscated neon green, walking in the jungle, and suddenly being impaled by a bamboo pike trap that sprang up from the ground underneath him, stabbing through his ass, and out of his stomach.

Then a group of camouflaged yellow-skinned soldiers, far shorter than the farang, encircled the farang, taking his gun, rummaging through his pockets and backpack, as his green face coughed up dark blood…

She'd not been able to skip over or even stop the video, her phone turning cold in her hands, but fortunately the video ended after 15 seconds, and the music resumed, her phone back to normal…

Jem went out, for a quick tryst with a local customer who lived nearby, and came back shortly, 3000 baht richer, wearing a new gold bracelet.

"I'll sell it later… I'm pretty sure it's real gold. It better be after what I let him do…"

Na didn't need to know the details and hoped, too, for her roommate, that the bracelet was real…

That evening, before work, they again ate papaya salad at the same restaurant, and one of the two cooks, the owner of the restaurant, a 70ish lady, happened to be from a village near Na's.

They chatted in their local dialect, and the owner gave Na a small green amulet etched with a laughing, golden Buddha figure and wished her luck in Bangkok…

The bar that night was far less packed.

Sundays aren't as busy, Na's roommate told her.

Around the start of her shift, Na had a near dwarf, a pudgy little Irish man, in a stylish 3-piece suit, buy her a lady drink and request a lap dance.

He must have been about 75 and had a toupee and the breath of a corpse…

The Leprechaun groped her tits and ass but didn't want to bar fine her. She estimated that, at his age, he'd be quick work and was disappointed when he refused.

The penurious bastard left the bar quickly and barely gave her anything of a tip, actually tipping the chunky waitress more! The animal!

The rest of the night was pretty dreary, not much foot traffic at Nana, not many patrons in the bar, though Na noticed more Malays around and Arabs than she'd seen last night…

Na was bored and wishing she could at least play on her phone to pass the time. She'd probably only make 600 baht, a far drop from the 19000 she'd made the previous night.

What was a dud of an evening took an unexpected swing, however, when he appeared…

Na didn't see him walk in. Her peripheral vision was good, and she'd been keeping an eye on the door, especially since so few people were there that night, and so she wasn't sure how she'd missed that... Him!

He was a barrel-chested, bear of a young man, a farang, with a pale white, clean shaven face, boxy jaw, and cleft chin.

The farang, his head a mess of unruly ruby red hair, wore mirrored aviator shades and was shirtless, wearing just camo shorts and flip flops and covered in red body hair, practically an orangutan…

Normally one needed to be fully clothed to enter Nana Plaza, let alone a bar. She'd never seen any farang shirtless before in there.

What was weirder, though, was that wrapped around his neck and shoulders was a long snake, a king cobra.

The snake appeared happy, comfortable, slithering around in the farang's copse of red body hair as the farang stroked it, and the snake wagged its forked tongue, stared directly at Na…

Na, on the dais, gasped, nudged Karen, nodded over in the bare-chested, bizarre farang's direction, but when Karen craned her neck to see, the farang was gone.

Na scanned the bar. Didn't see him anywhere.

Then she found him.

This time, though, he was without the snake, and was sipping on a glass of absinthe, had a "Jesus Saves" black t-shirt on, and sat on a barstool directly below the stage, a meter or so away from Na.

His Jesus shirt took Na aback. It featured an emaciated Jesus on the crucifix, dripping with blood from his nailed limbs, a crown of thorns on his head, expression of anguish on his face.

What a curious symbol for a religion, she cogitated. Buddhist imagery being so serene. The Christian imagery always so bloody, dire…

But, although a devout, practicing Theravada Buddhist, she greatly respected Jesus Himself, how He had given His life for others. She had a Christian classmate in high school and found the stories inspiring…

“Hey there, darling,” the Jesus shirt farang grinned and waved to Na.

“Sawadee Ka!” Na waied and ambled over, her 10cm heels clicking as she crept in his direction.

“Where you come from?” she asked, bending down to speak with the strange stranger.

“Buffalo.”

“Buffalo?”

Na couldn’t help but snicker.

“Buffalo is animal!”

“Sure is. A place too. On the East Coast, upstate New York…”

“USA?”

“United States, YOO ESS AY, babydoll.”

“You on holiday? How long you here?”

“I’m here until I’m not... Staying in …. “

Na couldn’t hear his response and didn’t care too much, but the hotel a farang stayed, the better the hotel, was an effective barometer of how much cash he had. And how much to charge. So she asked again.

Once more, she couldn’t understand his garbled response. Perhaps the music, AC/DC’s “Thunderstruck”, was too loud.

“Why you have snake? It real? Where it go?”

“All men have snakes, sweetie. Figured you’d know that by now. How far did you get in school?”

Na pursed her lips at his rejoinder, put her hands on her hips, tilted her head and grumbled “mansai!”

“Not you down there snake, sillyboy. Snake you have earlier.”

“Oh, that snake, my friend, Satan. He’s over there…”

Na looked over to where the farang gestured, the back row of seats in the bar, and saw the snake had grown, exponentially, and curled into a coil, a lit cigarette dangling from the corner of its mouth.

Guns N’ Roses’ “Welcome to the Jungle” blasted out of the bar’s sound system, and Satan bobbed its head to the opening riff…

“Ah!” Na screamed and took a step back, seeing the snake.

She closed her eyes, rubbed them, drew a deep breath and opened her eyes again.

When her eyes opened, the snake was gone, but the farang remained. Na figured maybe the tramadol she'd been taking was messing with her head…

The farang now wore a snakeskin cowboy hat and a plain green shirt, and cut off camo shorts, combat boots.

"I'm looking for Bee. You seen her?"

"Bee? I no know her. I start here only yesterday. She work here? How you change clothes so fast? You play joke?"

"Oh, I am a joker, darling. My favorite playing card and Batman villain…"

"Ow, I see new Joker movie, have on my phone, so crazy!"

"On your phone? You must be playing jokes on ME, darling… So you don't know Bee? You look kinda like her. Thought you might be her sister."

"I no have sister. You want buy me drink?"

"That'd be groovy. Slide on down here, Bee."

"My name no Bee! My name Na!"

"Bee. I'm going to call you Bee. Until I find Bee. You're Bee."

"Okay, mister. What you name?"

"They used to call me Joker, but then another guy had the same nickname, so they called me Joker of Buffalo, but that was shortened to Job, pronounced like Joeb…"

“Joker. Hahaha, you funny man. You handsome man too, ka. You pay my bar fine?”

“What do I get if I pay your bar fine?”

“Everything you want, I do.”

“Everything?”

“Everything.”

“Can you become Bee? I’m looking for Bee…”

“I you Bee. I anything. I everything. You pay bar fine, no need buy drink.”

Na didn’t want the weird farang to slip away or change his mind over drinks. That happened sometimes, her roommates said.

The farang had started to grow on her a bit. There was something gentle in his voice. Soothing. She felt safe with him, and figured the snake, his change of clothes was just her imagination coupled with the bar’s dim lighting, or perhaps side effects from the tramadol, or maybe a ridiculous gag… He was a joker, after all…

However, she worried she might be stealing another bargirl’s customer, a big no-no, but since she was new, and had met pretty much all the other girls, not one called Bee, she figured she was safe, and could plead ignorance.

The crazy buffalo probably had his bars confused, anyway, and Bee was somewhere in Patpong. She decided to silence her mental palaver, her chattering monkey mind, and get down to business. Maybe the joker buffalo, Job could salvage this rotten night…

“How much is your bar fine, babydoll?”

“Bar fine 700 baht. 2500 baht give me after…”

“3200 baht? Prices really shot up, eh?”

“You handsome. I make you happy. Make you never forget. You pay bar fine and we go upstair or to hotel you.”

“Hmmm, alright, you drive a hard bargain there, darling. Let’s go upstairs. To the sky...”

“Okay, you pay boss bar fine.” Na motioned to where the mamasan sat. “I go change.”

Na leaned in, to kiss Job on the cheek, but he ducked away coyly and playfully pointed upwards.

Na stood up, stomped her foot and scowled, sarcastically, and stormed off to the dressing room.

In her street clothes, she returned to the bar area and didn’t see the farang anywhere and approached the mamasan, who sat with her head glued to her phone.

Walking over, Na nearly stepped on a giant cockroach that was scurrying across the floor.

She purposely dodged it, wondered who it was in a past life and felt bad for it, knowing if a farang found it, or even a less pious Thai, the cockroach would be trampled to death or sprayed with a noxious chemical or fall into a painful trap.

The cockroach ran underneath the stage, safely, passing by an unwitting Korean contingent of middle age males who’d just entered the bar…

Na told the mamasan she'd go with the farang in the cowboy hat who'd just paid her bar fine.

The mamasan, the indolent bitch, looked up from her phone with a discomfited gaze.

"There was no farang here with a cowboy hat. I'd have remembered him. And no one paid your bar fine. You okay? You taking drugs? Smoking the ganja? Don't do that here, on the clock, ka!"

Na's heart palpitated, and she shot back: "No! He was here! He must have left. Maybe he didn't understand. I'll look for him outside and bring him back. Hold on…"

The mamasan growled, not appreciating any bit of their exchange, and went back to thumbing her phone, which morphed into a dead, mango-sized, hairy gray rat…

Na retched and hurried outside, exiting through the black curtain hanging in the doorway, and stepped from the cool air-conditioned bar into a face-slap of steamy night air.

Looking around, she didn't see him anywhere in the plaza, but finally saw him.

He'd climbed up a utility pole on the block parallel to Nana Plaza, Sukhumvit Soi 4, and had lost his shades, his face now painted like a clown, and he pointed, waved, and hooted at her…

At this point, Na's mood shifted gears. From confused to just plain pissed off. Then to enraged.

How dare the farang play his jokes, dirty tricks on her! How dare he mulct her time and make her lose face!!! She would catch up with him, make him pay, sick the bar's security staff to rough him up.

The bar's security didn't take kindly to such shenanigans. The other night a farang trying to skip out on his bar tab got a hard punch in the jaw, his pockets emptied as he lay limp on the ground. Unable to pay his tab in full, security confiscated his watch and phone.

Na wished the same fate on Job, but she'd have to catch him first.

The crazy buffalo, still waving at her, jumped down from the pole, landing smoothly, on both feet, like a gymnast, surprisingly agile for his bulky size. Then he turned and pulled down his camo shorts, mooned Na…

Na seethed, trembled with rage, and ran down the stairs, pushing aside a ladyboy who cursed at her, and flung off her heels (they were cheap fake Chanel anyway) and ran barefoot after the buffalo joker, who'd commandeered a pogo stick- an EXTREME pogo stick…

The farang hopping at a torrid pace, in super-high frog leaps, ten feet in the air, down Soi 4, the kangaroo clown crisscrossing, jumping his way through the idle Bangkok traffic.

Nearly getting run over by a motorcycle taxi or two, Na flagged one down, mounted the back seat, and commanded the driver to follow the high-hopping farang.

The driver shrugged his shoulders, and Na simply pointed him in the bouncing pogo stick's direction and they took off into the night, weaving through traffic, finally stopping only 10 mins or so down the road, in front of Na and her roommates' favorite roadside restaurant, where the pogo stick lay, abandoned…

Na quickly paid the driver the 15 baht he requested, dismounted and chased towards the pogo stick, huffing and puffing, searching around, but the flying buffalo was nowhere in sight.

Na saw the restaurant owner, the lady from nearby her hometown, and told her all about the incident, how the crazy farang had ducked out, tricked her, not paid…

While Na was describing the farang, the snake, the restaurant owner's jaw dropped.

She asked what the farang's name was.

"Job, Joker of Buffalo… I'm not sure. He was nuts…"

The restaurant owner took a step back, held her heart and caught her breath.

She told Na that many years ago, in the late 60s, she'd worked at Nana, at a bar, and one of her most loyal customers was a red-haired farang, with a pet snake he'd bought at a market.

She said the farang had proposed marriage to her and that he'd wanted to move with her, to her village, start a farm, raise snakes, but he'd disappeared, never returned.

"What was his name?"

"Jake… But his nickname was Joker… He was from Buffalo. It's a real city in America, Buffalo…"

"Was… Your nickname… Bee?"

"Yes."

Na's phone, in her front pocket, turned cold and buzzed.

She thought it might be the bar, but instead it was a video, taking up the full screen of her phone.

She and the restaurant owner watched as Jake, in fuzzy footage, walked through a jungle, in fatigues, holding a machine gun… A palm tree in the background ablaze…

Jake stepped into a trap of some sort, and a sharpened bamboo stick sprung up from the jungle floor, driving straight up his ass, impaling him through the stomach.

Blood curdled in his mouth and he writhed in pain and a small group of camouflaged, tiny yellow men, homunculi, painted in mud and leaves encircled him, grabbed his gun, went through his pockets.

Then an explosion.

A sage colored hand grenade had landed nearby, and everyone, including Jake, were blown into bloody pieces.

The video instantly rewound to the beginning, where Jake was walking in the jungle and was impaled and continued playing on the same loop.

Na tried turning it off, but it wouldn't stop, the video, so she opened the phone, which got increasingly frigid, and she yanked out the battery.

Still, the video played, and the phone went cold as ice. Its rectangular edges lit up in neon green lining.

Mortified, Na threw the cheap, olive Oppo phone down into a nearby sewer, which was purling in a lime subterranean liquid, and the screen of the phone went dead…

Then there was a loud bang in the distance, and audible firecracker-like, popping sounds…

The racket emanating from down the road…

STRANGER IN BANGKOK

I was sitting in the upstairs food court of the _____ shopping mall, twirling my fork into a sizzling plate of spicy noodles. With the skyline of Bangkok hanging in front of me, I cast my eyes over at a row of floor to wall windows and soaked in the sweeping city views.

It was dusk in Krung Thep. And the city sat in its usual outline, its usual patina of haze. The city's glass-plated skyscrapers pumping their usual neon blasts. Then the sky began dimming, as if a knob were turning, and I glared in open-mouth silence as a mass of dark clouds crept forth, threatening a torrential downpour.

I returned my focus to my food, and while chomping on big bites of noodles, I noticed a stranger's silhouette sitting down to a seat nearby.

Weirdly, he wasn't eating, and his body was shifted toward mine. Suddenly I had that feeling one gets when they know they're being watched. And I could sense the stranger looking over toward me. I could feel his eyes.

But I minded my business. Didn't meet his gaze. I'm not usually one to start random conversations with strangers. Especially in Bangkok. Bangkok (and Thailand) is sometimes referred to as the "Land of Scams," due to its preponderance of dodgy characters and wily strangers who'll try to cajole you into a vast array of confidence tricks, so it's best to be cautious who you talk to.

It's worth mentioning, too, that the Thais are generally an inherently shy, reserved people, and not apt to speak randomly with strangers. So if a person approaches me, unsolicited, especially in a public place, in Bangkok, I'm highly skeptical of their intentions…

(It could be reasoned, too, that anyone, anywhere talking to random strangers, unsolicited, on the street, is likely NEVER anything good…)

A perfect defense for unwanted, unsolicited salutations, I've found, is wearing earphones and pretending as though I can't hear anything, even if I can, and to smile, shake my head, politely, avert gazes, walk briskly, and continue on my way.

That's not to say anyone speaking to strangers in Bangkok is a scammer. There are some expats who like talking to strangers, usually other expats, and I understand that, have nothing against it; possibly they're just friendly, outgoing folks.

Then there are also some expats who've lived for years in non-English speaking countries, and when presented with the chance to speak with someone of similar origin, they'll jump at it, start talking like they'd just snorted a line of cocaine.

And hey, I can understand that too. They might see another expat as someone they might finally be able to have an intelligent conversation with, someone they can talk football or politics or visa issues, 90-day reports, or someone just to grumble to.

Or maybe they're just lonely.

Being an expat can often mean much time spent in solitude. And there are some who like it that way… And others who struggle with it…

A spiral of noodles I bit into were spicier than I anticipated, exploding in my mouth with searing heat. The noodles must have been packed with additional hidden clumps of chili peppers, and the intensity of the taste caused me to tense up and sneeze, clearing out my sinuses. As I was blowing my nose into a wad of napkins, I heard a European accent cut through the collective hum of the food court. It sounded German, the accent, and it was asking, "Is it spicy?"

“Sure is, but it’s tasty. I love Thai food,” I replied, shifting my eyes and laying them on the stranger who’d been sitting next to me, wordlessly, for the last few minutes.

“Are you American?” the stranger asked, and I estimated his age at 60 something. The stranger had a somewhat stereotypical, stout, Germanic look to him, with a bit of a beer belly, and a bushy white mustache spreading over his upper lip like a bad rash.

“That’s right. I’m from Buffalo,” I replied, averting prolonged eye contact. Then I wiped beads of perspiration from my brows and returned to my noodles.

There was a certain fire in the stranger’s glare that was unsettling. Of course, this being Thailand, it would have been easy to label him as a child molester of some sort, as Elon Musk did to that diver, and yes, the stranger had that tree jumper, kiddy fiddler type look to him, like a guy you’d see on *To Catch a Predator*, that kind of creepy old guy gestalt.

But I tried not to rush to judgment. Look, despite widespread perceptions and beliefs, and despite that I even recently heard the comedian Andrew Schulz, on Theo Von’s podcast, shitting on Thailand for its pedophile problems, despite that, the truth is, after several years in Thailand, I’ve not heard or seen much about pedos. Allegedly they’re in Africa, South America nowadays. Pedos are like a species of parasite that flock to wherever they can feed, satiate their sickness, and most recently, at least according to an article I saw on *Vice*, that’s in places like Madagascar.

So yeah, maybe the guy was just starved for conversation. And I obliged him. Started spitting small talk. ----

The stranger went on to tell me he’s from Berlin, Germany, and had worked for Puma for 25 years, all here at a factory in Thailand. His English was perfect, only slightly accented, and not in a cartoonish Nazi way, but more in a sophisticated slow drawl.

For the first couple of minutes, we were having the typical expat conversation, about travel, nice places to see in Thailand, the best islands, all that.

But then the dialogue turned dark. No, he wasn't a pedo, thankfully, or not that he disclosed. But he'd obviously gotten himself into an unfortunate situation.

He mentioned something about trying to get his pension, that he was relying on it, and that the German Embassy in Bangkok refused to help him receive it. And that now he had no money. And that he'd gotten into an argument with the staff at the embassy and they'd asked him to leave the premises. And that he was thinking of going back there tomorrow. To kill someone.

Laughing it off, figuring (and hoping) that it was the sarcastic, black humor of the northern European variety, I chuckled and spat back, "nah, definitely don't do that," and kept at my noodles, trying to plow through them quicker so I could get away from this situation, before the German divulged anything incriminating.

I started worrying a bit, too, thinking, like, shit, what if he really does walk into the German Embassy tomorrow and stabs someone… What if I read about that in the *Bangkok Post*… Should I call the cops? Would the cops in Bangkok even do anything about such rantings, possible threats? The "Boys in Brown," the coppers here, aside from collecting "tea money," aren't known as the most proactive of police forces…

Of course, too, I was thinking the German might be one of those deranged foreigners in Thailand I hear about jumping off a balcony, another *farang* joining the Pattaya Flyers Club… He definitely looked the type. There was a discomfiting, quiet rage to him, and he reminded me of the old flick, *Falling Down*, that variety of older white guy fed up with the world and ready to kill.

I'd read on the *CIA World Factbook* that more Americans die in Thailand, per year, than anywhere else in the world. But I'm not sure about the Germans, where they die the most.

Normally, though, in Thailand, random violence is rare, and violent crime committed by foreigners is even rarer. Normally, from what I've seen, in Thailand, foreigners are more of a threat to themselves than anyone else.

In fact, at this very shopping center, there was an Italian, an older fellow, too, who, not far from where we sat, had done a swan dive from a fifth-floor ledge, landing splat, face down in a mess of bone and blood, on the ground floor, giving that day's shoppers a most unforgettably gruesome spectacle.

Oh, and this stranger definitely had that look; the German looked like a future suicide case. And speaking of his look, he had a certain shiftiness to him, a really dishonest face, with a jawline that was almost too squarish. It was almost like his chin and his jaw were too small for his skull, giving him a certain unnerving, creepy appearance, almost like a bottom-feeding fish, like a fish you'd see only at the deepest depths of the ocean.

Although he wore brown-tinted eyeglasses, I could see that his blue eyes were bright and small, small and beady, like two blue dots punched into his skull, which rendered his countenance even more sinister, and his skin was bad too, reddish and leathery, speckled in uneven clots of scraggly white body hair, and he had wrinkles in his forehead that ran deep, like cracks in stone, and they were loud wrinkles, too, wrinkles that told stories, stories of woe, stories of sleepless nights, stories of too much booze.

Again, I tried to put aside my prejudices. Look, I'm also a guy who escaped the clusterfuck of my home country to travel, roam, explore, have fun. I'm also a guy who found a job in this crazy beautiful tropical land. And I really don't care about what others do in their personal lives. As long as they aren't pedos, as long as they aren't violent pricks, as long as they aren't hurting anyone, who am I to judge. Right?

A red flash from the corner of my eye caught my attention, and I craned my neck, saw a muted flatscreen TV hanging from a wall nearby. It was showing a news story about a Czech billionaire who'd died in a helicopter crash, during a ski trip in Alaska.

The German joined me, glaring and gasping at the ghastly images of smoky black and gray 'copter wreckage strewn over a jagged white hilltop.

The German sighed and then commented on the horror of being in a helicopter crash. What it'd be like, as a passenger, inside a helicopter going down. The claustrophobia and fear the passengers felt in that helicopter cabin. The passengers, confined in that metal box, plummeting from the sky, their weight heavy with gravity, their screams, and what must have been going through their minds in those final minutes as their bodies rocked and swayed and shook and the emergency lights flashed and beeped. He wondered if the doomed

passengers had resigned themselves to death, if they were saying final prayers, or if they were thinking they'd survive the impact…

After taking a deep breath and exhaling loudly, he exclaimed, "Then whack! Lights out. His money meant nothing," and the German clapped on the table to punctuate.

A moment of silence followed, and we both turned our attention away from the TV. The profundity, enormity of his words sank in, and I wondered if the isolation of the pandemic, the lockdowns, if that'd made me even more socially retarded, made me into a total jerk, made me figure this guy all wrong, guessing him a chomo or boozer. What if he was alright after all? ----

But then the stranger started getting weirder. Going on and on about his money problems, how he couldn't eat, how he had absolutely nothing, and I suspected that this was likely a hustle. He probably made a habit of this, hitting up other foreigners for cash, likely because he'd dropped all his monthly pension bucks, as some expats do, on booze, or gambling, or maybe hookers and booze.

Or perhaps he was one of those unlucky souls who'd fallen in love with a bargirl from Nana or Soi Cowboy, only to discover she was already engaged, or even already married… Perhaps he was one of those unlucky souls to discover this AFTER he'd already paid for the marriage ceremony, bought her a house, forked over a hefty *sin sot*...

Of course he could just be poor. Maybe Puma didn't pay well. Many Thais often think that any foreigner in Bangkok is rich, but that's not always true. There are those with limited means who live in or venture to foreign countries. Then there are even some who venture to faraway lands and turn to begging or busking, playing guitar on the street for cash; "beg-packing" as it's sometimes called.

But this guy, he looked too old for beg-packing. I couldn't see him staying in a hostel, singing or dancing or begging on the street. Or maybe he just couldn't carry a tune, or didn't play guitar, I don't know.

Really, I'm guessing he pissed away his cash and then guilted others, in food courts, to fund his meals, so he could splurge on more important things to him, like hookers and booze. I concluded this summation, too, while glancing at his neatly cut helmet of gray hair, and, most notably, his clothes.

His clothes were too clean. Observing his pair of blue jeans, marshmallow white sneakers, and plaid polo shirt, it struck me that his duds were stainless and wrinkle-free. This being such, obviously he wasn't sleeping rough, camping in the park, eating lizards, like some of the "beg-packer" hippy types I'd heard of, seen online, those hippies with their dreadlocks and pungent potpourri stinks of body odor and patchouli oil.

It was close to Easter, and I noticed that the German wore a crucifix. So I asked him if he went to church and if he could talk to a priest, get help. I'm sure there are plenty of priests who'd help a person in his self-described dire straits.

(Although a cynical side of me suspected that possibly he'd already been using the priests too, had probably eaten breakfast at the church.)

He vaguely brushed the church suggestion off, saying the church nearby was "closed," which I'm sure was a lie.

(When he said the church was closed, I couldn't help but be reminded of certain shady locals, usually short fellows with smiles too big for their faces, the bloodsuckers who approach tourists outside the King's Palace in Bangkok, telling tourists the "temple was closed today," in order to set the tourists up for whatever scam…)

Then I suggested the German talk to his family, to which he replied that he had no family left. They were all dead or estranged. "25 years in Thailand, hard to keep in touch," he bemoaned.

It most certainly is. That was no lie. And herein sits a cruel example of expat life. The loss of ties with one's homeland and all in it and the reality that one is in a country, like Thailand, an ethno-state, where an expatriate will always be a foreigner, a guest, and can almost never achieve citizenship, or even permanent residency. Especially a person like this German guy. A guy with limited means. A guy with few to no Thai connections. A guy so broke and down on his luck he must rely on the pity of others.

Seeing where all this was going, I knew it was time to split, and I swallowed down the last savory bite of my spicy noodles and rose to leave. But before I did, I

decided to make merit and plucked out 50 baht from my pocket, and handed him the folded purple bill, patted him on the back and wished him the best…

My encounter with the German made me think of how lonely the escapist dream can end. The dream of spending one's final days in a tropical paradise. Then that dream turns into an old man dying by himself in a crappy apartment or guesthouse. An old man slumped atop a toilet, like a Far East, far-less fortunate version of Elvis… Or an old man supine in a messy bed, beside a bunch of empty booze bottles, his bloated corpse discovered by a cleaner or a landlord because of a neighbor complaining of a rotten stench…

And I wondered about my own 40-square-foot furnished apartment... Had anyone died there? Had anyone died in the bed I sleep in? How would I know, either way, and what would it really matter… Anywhere one goes, someone probably died, in that place, sometime throughout the course of human history…

(I don't believe in ghosts, anyway, but at least my apartment has a nice spirit house outside, so if anyone did die in my apartment, before, maybe they're living happily in the spirit house, with the other ghosts, just in case any of that is actually real…)

Pondering the long-term expat plight further, like, maybe, though, for some expats, I guess it's not always a terrible, lonely ending, dying in Thailand.

Perhaps, for some, it's a perfect way to retire, to end things, enjoying their golden years, in golden sunshine, in a warm exotic place. Heck, maybe they find a cute local lady, make buddies at the bar, and have heaps of fun times to close out their spins around the sun. There's a beauty to that, for sure, and I respect that. I've seen several older retired fellows in Thailand, often appearing to be ex-military, and they look happy as can be. And good for them.

But then there's the German guy. The cautionary tale. The way not to do Thailand. The way not to do life.

Honestly, however, most of what I got from this encounter was a potent reminder of why it's better to wear earphones and avoid talking to random strangers in Bangkok.

VAMPIRE DYNASTY

They're everywhere. On billboards atop highways. On humungous portraits adorning the facades of every public building.

They're ubiquitous as the heat and sun. They appear sometimes as young, virile. Other times with a touch of gray. But They are always beatific and bathed in favorable hues. Often They are with small cute canines perched on Their laps.

Despite attempts to frame Them as benevolent, They are concealing fangs. They are drinkers of blood.

Who are They?

They are the Vampires.

The Vampire Dynasty.

Their origins are typical. They arose through ancient violence and powered into alpha parasites.

The Vampires grow exponentially. Like nests of cockroaches. Or swarms of mosquitoes. The Vampires are a species between cockroach and mosquito. And anyone with the right tint can fuck into Them.

The Vampires dwell in palatial palaces, while Their hosts are sardined in tin shacks, riverside hovels, and stacked boxes of tiny apartments. The Vampires' hosts walk on dirt floors and trade time for food and plastic while the Vampires' toes touch cold to marble floors. The hosts snap selfies while the Vampires are always sitting at graceful angles.

The Vampires are sentient as snake gods…

The Vampires' servants must crawl in Their presence; literally, servants on their bellies, like obsequious, circus-trained amphibians, slithering and sniveling. Their hosts, as well, must bow to the Vampires' feet, crawl before them, prostrate in obeisance.

The Vampires maintain Their stranglehold through landownership. Through ancient violence, plunder, rape and conquest, They've cut open and seized possession of the expanse. But were They Vampires before the blood? History is subjective. And Their history is a painting of a painting. A picture of a picture.

The Vampires collect blood through taxes. The Vampires' faces occlude deeds and They collect blood through stakes in State enterprises. They maintain Their blood supply through fear, subjugation, and silence. Through laws governing remarks and criticism. It's not just how They feed. It's how They thrive.

The Vampires' land is a golden nation, a nation of the sun. But it is a hobbled nation. A nation so destitute its police must live on bribes. The Vampires' is a sick nation. A nation in hospital gowns. A nation stuck with syringes and tubes. The nation's blood sucked daily through the Vampires' network of darkened temples.

One might think the Vampires live in a bubble. That They only know luxury. And of course They do and They do. However, the Vampires also live in a perpetual state of fear. They live with gooseflesh. Their dreams are recurring nightmares. The Vampires' fear hangs heavily over Their heads, hangs low like black clouds fat with rain. Theirs is a necrotic fear, a fear that Their hosts, the masses, the blood supply, will shake Them off, flip over the Vampires' silver chariots and diamond-plated palanquins and drive jade stakes through the Vampires' darkly plump hearts.

The Vampires know this. The Vampires are educated in a way the masses are not. The Vampires read books when the masses do not. The Vampires are aware of history. The Vampires know of the guillotine. They know of exile. So They guard Their blood like a grizzly bear guards its cubs.

For years, the Vampires have drunk blood, unimpeded, with little to no dissent. However, Their hosts, the masses are awakening. The masses are discovering hematology. The masses are becoming phlebotomists. The masses have interconnected microscopes, are counting cells, and are looking for transfusions.

The Vampires know Their time is limited. So They have begun escape plans. They have begun offshore blood banks. They are shipping the masses' blood off under thick inky skies, in clandestine, cloak and dagger transfer operations. The Vampires have conspirators. The Vampires have disguises, passports, golden parachutes, machine guns, tanks, trampolines, helicopters, pogo sticks, submarines and emergency call options at the ready.

As of now, it's unclear what the Vampire Dynasty's future will hold. But whatever it is, it will involve blood.

BIG WAVE

The fishermen had set out early, right before the sun rose from the bottom of the sea… The ship's ragtag crew in sun-bleached clothes already showing blotches, big beads of sweat dripping down their necks…

Reeling in net after net of fish, the men threw and poured bucketloads of the slippery creatures into an assortment of containers lining the longtail boat's deck…

The oldest of the fishermen, Uncle Yai, swung his gaze toward the sea. Sniffing at the sea air's salty breezes, he had a premonition. He'd noticed a certain ripple in

the water. The seawater getting murky, foaming like saliva… Then he threw back his head to inspect flecks of glue-colored clouds congealing, darkening to a purpose. The clouds fat, fast, and forming into an inky being, a mass of black vapors and thunderheads beginning to eat away at the big blue box of sky above…

Age was respected on the boats, so the crew heeded Uncle Yai's warning. Gathered speed. Their task taking hold of the men like a fever. The fishermen picking up the pace as it was becoming clear today's fish flow would be fantastic thanks to the impending burst to come from the collecting skies. The men grunting, wiping sweat from their creased brows, hanging over the edge of the wooden longtail boat, twisting at ropes stirring the sea. The wiry men, with skin worn as an old couch, jerking out net after net stuffed thick with trembling, dripping wet clumps of fish.

Thankfully, the fishermen beat the rain. Beat the storm. Or so they thought.

They'd docked their boat and had been unloading their booty when the rain announced its arrival with a thunderclap. Then the fat black clouds opened, unleashing a shower of rain that swept over the beach like a long mop and was soon rattling over the village's tin roof shacks.

Sheets of rain washed over the men in waves, and Uncle Yai dropped his greasy fishnet, ran right through the downpour, dashing down the dock. Then he mounted his motorcycle and peeled out, rode furiously, riding through rising puddles and liquefied roads up toward a semicircle cluster of green hills dense and dark with vegetation. He wished to be as far from the sea as possible. Just in case the sea wished to again push forward its fists of water…

It'd been 16 years since the big wave. That Wile E. Coyote moment. When the Earth below him disappeared. Just as he'd been atop a palm tree, picking coconuts. He'd latched onto a piece of debris, kicked and maneuvered over to a rooftop. There he spent the worst day of his life watching that angry arm of ocean, that wreck, that wretched wall of water and all the awful chunks of concrete, bodies, livestock, cars, buses and boats forced forward… Uncle Yai hearing the wails, cries for help… That horror show… The worst day…

And now the rain was roaring. Mere wrinkles in the sea's surface turning to tall waves… Waves slapping further ashore… Waters rising from the ground while also

falling from the sky… The high winds whipping, ripping palm fronds, flying branches, tattered leaves… The dark skies and raging sea howling back and forth at one another in grim harmony, a horrible duet…

There hadn't been any rain, for months, on the island so its parched ground was like an empty bathtub, collecting the rainwater, seawater, letting it pool and rise. Quickly, arms of water were reaching onto the shore, forming flash floods, and breaking through the island's sunbaked crust, funneling through the village square, rejoining the island to sea.

The townsfolk, fishermen had run for shelter once the heavy rain hit. But the fishermen hadn't time to collect their spoils. The ship's crew had huddled atop a shophouse roof and were watching haplessly as their catch, their fish, still thrashing in buckets, floated up and spilled into the storm surge's flow… The fish sucked back to the sea's circulation… The fish seeming to smile as they swam off…

Uncle Yai brushed back a tuft of wet black hair from his forehead. Watched warily from the jungle hills as the storm surge pulled back like a wet carpet. Then the canopy of black clouds covering the sky receded. The sky shifting fast from darkness, to milky, to crystal clear. Then Uncle Yai sighed, shading his eyes with his right hand as he inspected the farthest reaches of the sea, that wilderness of water. But he found no trace of a massive wave.

FANG FANG'S FRIEND

Ghosts had always been a part of Fang Fang's life. Her grandmother was a medium, and villagers would flock to their family's countryside home, prostrate and beg for news from the spirit world. As a small girl, Fang Fang would watch the ceremonies and animal sacrifices, live chickens' throats slit open, and she served as a flower girl for ghost weddings.

It was a gift that ran in the family. The ability to see, hear, and even smell ghosts. It'd only passed through the maternal side, yet her mother had escaped it.

Probably for the better. While some might find it a blessing, to be able to communicate with the beyond, for Fang Fang, as she began encountering spirits, it felt like more of a curse.

The spirits she saw were never happy. They were angry ghosts, hungry ghosts. Ghosts of those who'd died in accidents. Panicked souls who didn't even know they were dead and were lost in the purgatory realm of the spirit world, the coffin-wide space between life and death.

At around three or four years of age she'd started seeing faraway figures, bodies missing arms, shadowy creatures limping, circling the rice fields, flickering in corners… The phantom forms soon finding her night and day, to the extent she couldn't tell nightmares from reality.

Fortunately, Fang Fang's grandmother knew exactly what was going on…

As a child, Grandma found the same frightening faces. Had also seen forms in the darkness. Had often awoken to a freezing cold room, seen ghastly figures with bloody, beaten faces pointed at her… Her nostrils flaring with the heavy scent of fear swirling in the icy air…

On a foggy winter morning, Grandma took a five-year-old Fang Fang into the courtyard behind their house. As the two sat on a stone bench, in that cold patina of smoke-colored fog, Grandma perched little Fang Fang atop her lap and explained the "gift," the ability to see spirits.

The precocious Fang Fang listened carefully, hanging on every word leaving her grandma's lips, each word exploding into a tiny white cloud that melted into the cold mist.

Then her grandma fished something clanky from out of her coat pocket. An amulet. A gold necklace, with a thin, egg-shaped pendant. On the pendant was an engraved image of a chubby, happy Buddha.

"This will keep you safe from the spirits," her grandmother whispered into Fang Fang's ear and carefully pulled the necklace over the child's tiny neck, hooked the clasp.

Fang Fang had been born into an impoverished family residing in the countryside of Zhengzhou.

She was one of the “left behind” children. Both her parents had left their village to seek work in the city, and she’d been raised by her grandmother, the medium, plus a network of village aunties and uncles.

From a young age, in addition to helping with ghost weddings, receiving guests, she’d also assisted her grandmother in the fields, digging, planting crops. Dirt was always under the child’s fingernails.

Out in the rice fields she’d be accompanied by ghosts. But after receiving the protective amulet from her grandmother, the worst of the ghosts, the hungry ghosts, angry ghosts, began to fade further into their distance… Though she could still sense the glares…

It was shortly after receiving the amulet that she had a welcome visitor. Xiao Mei. A young girl around her age. The two had met in the rice fields and immediately hit it off, talking about their favorite salty snacks.

Xiao Mei seemed so optimistic about the future, spoke of moving to the city, and she’d talk at length about the requirements she had for the boy she’d marry.

For several months, Fang Fang saw the girl, every day, in the rice fields. But after the harvest, Fang Fang’s friend disappeared, and Fang Fang heard gossip about a neighbor, a farmer who’d just been executed for strangling his wife and daughter to death, nearly four years prior. Then she saw an old school picture of Xiao Mei in the local newspaper…

By the time Fang Fang reached puberty, she’d blossomed into a beautiful young girl. It’d surprised everyone in the village, too, since neither her mother, nor grandmother, nor any other relatives had cover girl looks.

But Fang Fang was a beauty. Frequently she was compared to one of the Four Beauties of Ancient China, Xi Shi, a girl so beautiful that fish would sink in the water after being so overwhelmed by her beauty that they'd forget to swim.

Fang Fang's beauty was also made starker due to the gender imbalance in her village. This was during China's "One Child Policy" and no one in the village wanted their only child to be a girl. Some girl babies were having their necks snapped at birth, their tiny corpses thrown in the garbage. Eventually, in her village, boys came to outnumber girls by three to one.

By high school, virtually every boy in her village, her school, had fallen head over heels in love with her, and she'd soon found herself inundated with suitors.

One of her uncles had taken a shine to her too. That uncle was a short, skinny man in his early 30s, and he'd been fast rising through the ranks of the local chapter of the Communist Party.

One ugly, rainy afternoon, he'd come by the house, when she was doing housework and her grandparents were working the fields. What he did to her, she didn't understand, though it'd hurt, tremendously, and in a way she'd never experienced.

Later that evening, when she told her grandmother, her grandmother flew into a rage, her cheeks flushing blood red, a venomous glare steeled in her gaze.

Her grandmother then pulled Fang Fang from bed, and the two stormed into the living room, sat before their family altar.

In the bowl before the altar, her grandmother mixed water, a fragrant herb, and then reached a tissue into Fang Fang's underwear, swiped between her legs, and dunked the tissue into the bowl.

Her grandmother rose, and Fang Fang instinctively joined, the two of them standing before the altar, the bowl and its contents before them. Then her grandmother cusped her hands, pressing the palms together in the position of a budding lotus, and held her hands high above her head, whispered a prayer.

A couple of days later, the uncle had been found dead, floating in a nearby lake. He'd been riding his motorbike by the lake, when, according to police reports,

he'd lost control of the vehicle, driven straight into the body of water and drowned.

However, a villager, riding a donkey, witnessed the incident, and rumors of his account swirled furiously through the village. The villager said a water ghost, a silhouette of swirling water, had appeared, manifested itself on the bike's pillion. Then the ghost had wrapped its watery arms around the uncle's neck, and the two took a sharp turn, rode right into the lake.

Another week later, Fang Fang was visited by her uncle's ghost. Right outside her bedroom window. The ghost walking up and down invisible stairs, in the night sky. The ghost glowing under the moonlight, looking like a rotten fish… dripping wet, skin slipping off bone… The ghost shrieking and retching, pausing every step or two to vomit big blasts of filthy water.

The ghost swung his horrid face at her, shivering and shaking, a look of pain, guilt and fear in its wild, ghastly eyes. Emitting a wheeze, then a terrible cough, the spirit then faded into the night.

However, this time the ghost didn't scare Fang Fang, and it wasn't long before she was fast asleep.

THE HAZE

It wasn't since 2014 that Shanghai had seen such haze.

In recent years, Emperor Poo had enacted several measures to clean up the air. Factories were held to higher emission standards. Illegal factories shuttered. Vehicles, too, were held to stricter emission standards, and altogether, there'd been far more days with blue skies.

Until the winter of 2025.

No one knew why exactly. It'd been unexplainable. Just one day the skies turned thunderstorm gray, yet no rain came. And the skies remained overcast, which wasn't unusual at that time of year. But then the haze came. And it came on strong.

It was originally thought to be fog, and it'd appeared to be fog. It was a thick mist that curdled in over the Bund, soon wrapping itself over Shanghai like a shroud. The haze reaching out endlessly over swaths of city blocks, fogging in a milky white miasma that remained parked over whole neighborhoods, reduced visibility to mere meters.

Meteorologists were unable to identify the causes of the mist, the fog, the smog, the haze, or whatever it was. Originally, it was believed that it'd pass after a few days. Perhaps it was a weather pattern. That was at least the official line from the local weather bureau. But after a week, the haze remained idle over the entirety of the city.

And it wouldn't budge. Normally such masses of air would pass. But not this one. It remained and remained snarling traffic, cancelling flights, bringing bustling Shanghai to a standstill.

Locals began to grow restless. The public demanded answers. But none, at least from the government, were forthcoming. The haze started to then grow, coalesce, enveloping the city so thickly that the mere meters of visibility shrank to centimeters.

Vehicular traffic ground to a halt after a series of gruesome accidents. Rescue crews unable to retrieve bodies, wreckage, due to the haze. Flights, trains had to be suspended indefinitely, entire highways shut down.

Emperor Poo kept silent, but his deputies and orderlies attempted to assuage concerns, stating that it was a rare weather event. And this was originally bought by the populous. And the government had been successful in maintaining the food supply to the city. However, the people's patience began to run thin, when, two weeks after the haze had started, the mysterious choking deaths began.

The deaths were reminiscent of the black plague. Random city dwellers started coughing up blood, asphyxiating on what appeared to be a mixture of bile and blood…

Bodies could be seen in the city streets. Dead bodies, with skin pale as frozen ice, lay in front of public buildings, or were slumped over, sprawled out on sidewalks, all in pools of bloody black puke. The expired urbanites' faces stamped with startled, perplexed expressions…

Once the choking deaths began, the government cut off internet access to the city. Then ceased broadcasting local or national news about the haze and about anything to do with Shanghai. The army was called in, in hazmat suits, to seal off the area.

But still, the haze remained parked over Shanghai. Didn't move eastward, southward, northward, or westward. It remained trapped, affixed over the metropolis, as if kept in place by a roof of some sort.

However, as much as Emperor Poo's government attempted to keep the extraordinary situation under wraps, there were those in Shanghai with satellite internet connections, those with software allowing them to bypass censorship controls, and news of the choking deaths, images of dead bodies piled in public streets, corpses curled and ghastly, bloody vomit dripping from their mouths… these and other unsettling images circulated outside the Middle Kingdom, throughout the free world, via internet, social media and traditional international media outlets...

Blame for the haze, choking deaths was tossed around, like a political hot potato, and the usual finger-pointing and screaming matches ensued.

Several prominent voices in science, the media, and even celebrities weighed in, with various conflicting takes. Meanwhile, the city of Shanghai started sinking, its districts detaching, submerging lower, the land masses eventually breaking off and spilling, crumbling into the Bund and the East China sea.

And after a few more weeks the news cycle just moved on.

HOSTAGE SITUATION (RED RAIN 1)

The mirrored walls and ceiling went pink. And in the ceiling a high-definition image formed… It was Stephen Hawking, the scientist, at a strip club… A Lil Jon rap song blared as a young Black exotic dancer, in a thong, was twerking her sizable buttocks only inches from Doctor Hawking's face…

Then the ceiling, then the room went dark.

It was as if the power had cut out, but the air conditioner droned on. The neon lights from the bar across the street still danced in my window, and I could hear stray cats screeching and yelping. I think one was in heat.

My phone buzzed. I reached for it but found myself stuck to the bed, as if my body were made of Velcro.

"It's a hostage situation," called out a computerized, Stephen Hawking-sounding voice from the city street, "he's up there with a fucking machine gun."

Then there were sirens and vehicles with loud revving engines. It was a calamitous commotion… a cacophony.

"Call it off. Call it off," the computer voice commanded, and it sounded now like the voice was blasting from a speaker phone.

A spotlight shot into my room, tracked my pet scorpions. They were out of the dollhouse again and crawling around the foot of my bed. Then I saw Shitbear was jumping up and down on the bed, had my elderly woman sexdoll in a headlock. Shitbear, in the space of three days, had already grown to the size of an Oompa Loompa and was wearing a RUN-DMC, all-black Adidas tracksuit and heavy gold chains... And a scary grin.

"In dark times, will the children sing?" Shitbear cried out. Then he stopped bed-jumping. Stood in place and snapped my sexdoll's silicone neck. Then he tossed the floppy sexdoll to the floor.

"Yes, yes they will! The children will sing about the dark times!" Shitbear exclaimed.

Shitbear then raised his arms, outstretched them, knocked on Heaven's Door, and with that, my pet scorpions came crawling over him. The scorpions multiplying into a festering swarm. Shitbear soon engulfed in the scorpions, wearing them in

a live-action suit. Then Shitbear dove from my bed, as if at a rock concert, stagediving…

I found myself unattached, able to stagger up from the bed. I was naked and found my body covered in tattoos. Tattoos of numbers and equations.

The lights clicked back on and buzzed like a cloud of flies. And I saw that the silver walls of my room were melting into pink wainscoting that became strawberry milk. Then the hardwood floor slicked over in a slippery substance that smelled of coconuts. Perhaps it was coconut oil.

I slipped and slid, like a novice ice skater, to the window, to meet the commotion. The scorpions paid me no mind, were too busy gnawing at the carcass of Shitbear.

Stepping over my busted elderly woman sexdoll, I opened the blackout curtains, scanned the shitty street and spotted an old bag lady naked and crucified to the front door of an abandoned McDonald's.

Stepping away from the window, I flicked on my phone and was greeted with an ad for a work-from-home job. The ad featured a smiling young lady, in a hot pink bikini, working on her laptop while sitting alone on an empty white sand beach, crystal-clear water lapping at her bare feet.

The smiley girl in the WFH ad looked nothing like my sexdoll, the Stephen Hawking stripper, or the naked homeless lady crucified to the abandoned McDonald's.

JUST AS YOU FALL ASLEEP (RED RAIN 2)

The room was spinning. I'd had a few too many shots of whiskey and lay back into the king-sized bed in my hotel room. I've heard hotels called depressing and impersonal, especially generic, chain hotels like this one, but I must admit to finding a comfort in the anonymity, a soothing nature to the familiarity.

Anywhere I go in the world, the Marriott is the same…

I'd really had too many shots, I pondered, and the blackout curtains were open, the balcony's glass doors drinking in neon lights. Ambient street sounds reverberating along the walls. Outside, at a bar across the busy street, a Filipino band was playing a tortured acoustic folk version of "Shape of You."

Despite the hotel's generic comfort, I could start to see mind rot, wolf eyes and a cosmic glare tangling in the half-mirror over the TV. The whiz of the AC was hypnotizing. Then the lingering scent of the room service tray wafted and tingled my nose. Spicy noodles…

This wasn't my first rodeo. Sudden somnolence followed. A salesman's smile and an invisible chloroform rag to the mouth. A push to the gate. And I alighted to an entrance…

Then I was on a busy city street. I was in a spacesuit, skateboarding by Madonna and a college-aged blond girl, a sorority type, and the two were doing vocal warmup exercises in front of an overturned Tesla. The overturned Tesla was on fire, in bright blue flames. Madonna had a pit bull on a leash and was naked, covered in peanut butter. The young girl was stripping naked and was putting on a nun's outfit, started singing something about how she "wanted boobs like Katy Perry's."

Skating on, I ollied over a curb, stole onto a sidewalk and saw a subway stop filled with a clumped mass of headless businesspeople. The headless mass in pantsuits, smart casual, and tight-fitting three-piece suits. The headless mass a paralyzed stampede, unable to step down the stairs leading to an underground subway station…

Suddenly I was in a red mist. A dragon drone lifted me into the air, via a hook and chain, like a live milk cow dangling from a crane.

With the dragon drone puffing, pushing me forth, I flapped my arms and watched from above like God. I witnessed schools of weathered, shirtless, mud-caked men, blunts dangling from their chapped lips. The men were growling. Carrying axes and shovels. The men were exiting a clown car and marching in a single-file line. They were trudging toward a dumpster fire. The dumpster in the middle of an empty city street… The dumpster fire encircled by obese high school cheerleaders practicing Tai-Chi...

Shimmery white vapors of steam curled up from the dumpster's conflagration as the dirty shirtless men brushed past the obese cheerleaders. The men, stepping forward, formed human pyramids and then bellyflopped, dove into the dumpster, disappeared into its flames.

The dragon drone honked, sputtered, lowered me like an anchor and dropped me onto a moving skateboard that was riding down the sidewalk on its own.

Just in time for the black flies…

Waves, funnels of black flies emerged from open sewers, poured out of skyscrapers' windows and doorways. The flies on a kamikaze mission, flying straight into the dumpster fire, zapping into orange explosions, popping like popcorn…

A bare-chested, emaciated man cut a figure through the black mass of flies, stood alone on a street corner. The man had a head so big he looked alien. The man started thrumming his harp-like, skeletal ribs, sang "Like a Virgin." As I skated past him, swatting away flies, with my hands, he handed me a phone, an early telephone, with a cup-receiver attached to a string. A phone from the 1940s.

"Ring ring!" he called out, and I noticed several gaps between his upper teeth. Then his big head began to shrink, like a balloon slowly losing its air.

Reaching through a swarm of black flies to receive the phone, I heard a loud gong, and then another, and another, the gongs louder and louder until I was jolted awake, and when I awoke, I lifted my head, widened my eyes and turned my gaze to see the hotel room's landline ringing off the hook.

Wiping the sleep from the corners of my eyes, I struggled, swam through the bed and bellycrawled and dragged myself to the phone. I reached for, scooped up the receiver, which, in that moment, looked like a pair of stumpy legs on a stick. Then I pressed the cold cups to my right ear and cheek, heard a computerized, Stephen Hawking voice. The voice had a tunnel echo to it, as if sounding from a bullhorn: "There's been a shooting. Remain inside your room and bolt and lock your door."

Before I could react, the line went dead. Then I rolled out of bed, looked out the window, saw the Filipino band, all four of them, gunned down, lying in puddles of

blood. The one with the man-bun was still clutching his acoustic guitar, the guitar with a bullet hole in its pickguard…

Then my cell phone rang. The adrenaline had woken me up and I rushed over to my phone, picked it up, and clicked the green button to receive the call. The call was from an unknown number. And when it connected, I heard the same Stephen Hawking tunnel voice saying: "You've reached a number that has been disconnected or is no longer in service. Please check the number and try again."

BANGKOK SLEEP (RED RAIN 3)

Bangkok was in a slumber, a gloomy silence.

A trickle of sweat slid down my spine, and I panned my gaze out around the empty street, below my building, gave it a searching look.

Nothing. Only a scrawny gray stray cat creeping down the alley. Hopefully it'd catch some of the rats that'd been running around, though I wasn't sure the stray cat, as skinny as it was, could take any, much less many, of those rats, in a fight. The rats seemed to be growing larger, day by day. Must be the takeout food place, an Indian curry ghost kitchen, always chucking out its leftovers. That must be providing their sustenance.

I'd been standing on my balcony, watching the rats, having a break from reading. It'd been my solace, my sanctuary, reading, sticking my nose into books. Disappearing into authors' worlds, studying fascinating subjects, a wonderful refuge from the apocalyptic scene the world had become.

However, despite reading several books, long-neglected classics included, the solitude was eating at me. The solitude, like a creature, inside me, shed its mass, was spreading over me…

It was in these days that I began seeing things, hearing voices. Before now, I'd never hallucinated. But now, hallucinations had become a daily occurrence.

At first, I'd been seeing floaters. Then the floaters transformed into larger shapes, distinct outlines, what initially began as possibly being animals grew into human forms. Something living in the corner of my eye… As if a person were there, in my apartment, with me.

Not only was I *sensing* the presence, but I was also *feeling* the presence. It felt like that noticeable, uncomfortable feeling of gaze detection, when you know a person is looking at you. And they are. You see them, their eyes fixed upon you. That was the feeling I was having, being in my apartment, I was feeling as if I had someone staring at me. All the time.

It was especially strong, the feeling, in the shower.

Standing in the shower, water rushing over me, I'd sense, something, there. After washing my hair, one morning, I opened my eyes and was finally confronted by…

A man, with abnormally stumpy legs, arms that were long, hanging below his kneecaps. He was portly and short, bald, and appeared to be in his 50s or 60s. His skin smooth as porcelain. He wore a beer shirt and a kilt. Then he sneered, lifted his kilt, and a fierce, hissing nest of neon green snakes was nuzzling in and around his pelvis. Then he slowly disappeared into the steam of the running shower.

At first sight, I'd been mortified, but as he melted into the mist of the shower, a towering wave of relaxation, chillaxed me into an almost Zen, preternatural state…

The next morning, I awoke, slid my eyes open, and it felt to me as if my eyeholes were peepholes, two peepholes in a clandestine hotel, somewhere near a train station. Somewhere where it's still black and white and where people still use payphones.

But then I noticed I remained in Bangkok. And a blood sun had risen. A stray mosquito retreated to the base of my television, and I squinted at the slants of light trickling in from between the blinds, dust mites dancing in the air.

Then I saw that the man in the kilt had returned. But this time he was shirtless.

His stomach cut wide open, his entrails were spilling from his stomach, in a wet-hot, gooey, red and black mess.

The entrails shifted into snakes; the same bright green reptiles I'd seen before on his pelvis. The snakes slithering up quickly, from the floor, beginning to wrap themselves, coil around the kilt-wearing intruder, and within seconds, he'd again vanished into the air.

Once more, the Zen rush washed over me, and remained with me, even when I went out to the balcony and noticed that I was wearing a kilt.

ACCIDENT ON THE OUTSKIRTS OF SHANGHAI

It was a usually hectic day, on a heavily trafficked road, outskirts of Shanghai…

The sky was smog grey. The December air damp, 6 Celsius and bitter with diesel and PM2.

A fast-food deliveryman on an e-bike, coffin nail dangling from his mouth, was racing a yellow light and hooked a left at the front gate of an adjacent apartment compound.

From his blind side, an 18-wheeler, burgundy semi-truck, hauling gravel…

The trucker, a buzzcut *shushu*, blasting love ballads, singing to distorted speakers…

… a sudden 90+ decibel horn…

The deliveryman met the semi's grill and pancaked beneath rubber and steel.

The deliveryman's bones and bike pulverized; his body split in two; his torso, limbs, wholly severed; machinery and mangled orange jumpsuit, dark blood, innards, appendages carpeting the asphalt…

The truck driver bumping, thumping over the body, tried in vain to brake but skidded out, and struck a pedestrian, a schoolgirl, crushing her foot, before he twisted the steering wheel, jackknifed and collided into an apartment block's withered facade.

Passersby froze and stared at the fallen young girl as she writhed, wept and wheezed, clutched what was left of her foot and screamed for her mother.

Passersby pointed phones and photos, panoramically live-streamed the scene, and texted texts.

The trucker, in shock, sat hugging the wheel, twitching, tears streaming down his red, cherubic cheeks... Lachrymose love ballads still playing… "我想你 "…

A circle of onlookers formed around the girl. Another formed around the truck.

Locals looked over the idling vehicle while its driver remained still in the cab.

The girl's red grandparents arrived. Her grandpa slapping on the hood of the semi, on the door, finally hurling a silver baijiu bottle that blistered into pieces, denting the windshield.

The police arrived. Cordoned off the area. Two ambulances and purple paramedics collecting body parts, carrying away the shrieking schoolgirl on a gurney.

Blue policemen restrained the girl's relatives and were finally able to coax the trucker out...

Social media lit up with different factions assigning the blame to various parties.

Some censured the deliveryman for running a yellow light. Many faulted the trucker for driving too fast. A few placed the responsibility solely on the Japanese manufacturer of the truck.

The girl's foot had to be amputated, and her family sued the trucking company.

The trucker sued the delivery company.

The delivery company blamed the deliveryman and refused to pay compensation to his family...

A couple weeks later, the deliveryman's family held a protest at the intersection, hoisting enlarged *shenfenzheng* portrait photos of the young deliveryman, unfurling long red banners that blocked and snarled morning traffic.

They held hand-written signs, calligraphic claims the apartment complex had an unsafe parking lot and front gate area; demands for indemnification. A female monk in white robes burned sheets of paper, knelt and said prayers in the middle of the street.

The deliveryman's mother shrieked and prostrated in the road and had to be carried away by policemen. The protesters were arrested and held in administrative detention for five days.

About a month after the protest, the municipality installed a flashing amber "caution" road sign at the intersection.

Then the whole incident was scrubbed from social media and news outlets at the special request of a local land development company…

I HAS A BUCKET

I was dirty as a begpacker. Stinking of liquor and ganja, I was limping down Sukhumvit Road.

Then I was hopping on a penis-shaped pogo stick, up to a flyover, and I bounced up each stair like it was a rectangular trampoline, the stack of mouse-gray concrete stairs moving like an escalator or a Stairmaster machine from the gym. Each stair growing more foreboding as it slid down. I was really riding an electric moving monster!

My balance was off. I couldn't surmount the stairs. Instead, I allowed the penis pogo stick to dissolve and let the current carry me back to the pavement. Then I spotted a flickering figure in a most curious mask.

The figure cut in and out, like it was attempting to buffer, or beam up ala *Star Trek*. And it wore a 1910s gas mask, something from WW1. A blob of pink fluffy feathers protruded from the mask's mouth, as if the figure had slapped a feather duster to his face.

The flickering figure quickly faded, yielded to a burning vehicle, a tuk-tuk…

The tuk-tuk was aflame, driving recklessly down the sidewalk, backward. Pedestrians, hawkers, and police dodging, yelling, jumping out of the honking vehicle's awful path… Shadowy figures in hazmat-like, fire retardant suits stood inside the carriage of the 3-wheeled vehicle, randomly lighting and tossing coconut bombs…

A giant man chasing after the tuk-tuk tore by. He clenched an empty blue wastebin to his chest and was in a bright golden shawl and had a body shaped like a walrus. But he also had an unusually small head, a head the size of an ice cream scoop.

As the ice cream head barreled by, I could hear him chattering, through his worm-sized lips, "I HAS A BUCKET! I HAAAAS A BUUUUUUUUCKEEEEEEET!"

THE KAREN AND AXL ROSE

AN ACT OF FICTION AND IDIOCY

1

When Sam Philips was a kid, he'd dreamed of being a rock star, playing guitar in a rock band like Dokken, Mötley Crüe, or Guns N' Roses. Those awesome bands he'd seen on MTV, on Headbanger's Ball, those heavy metal icons he idolized.

It was all he could imagine being. All he wanted since he could remember. His very first memory being him seeing an Ozzy Osbourne video on MTV. His face glued curiously to the TV, he'd gazed at the screen in awe, mesmerized by Randy Rhoades' guitar playing, and he knew, that was it. That's what he wanted to be.

He'd watch MTV, every day, and he danced, headbanged and sang along to the hits and strummed a broomstick, pretending it was a Les Paul, and banged on pots and pans, pretending he was Tommy Lee.

Later, at age 11, he saved up his allowance and cash from his paper route and bought a candy apple green BC Rich guitar and a crappy amp and distortion pedal from a pawnshop.

Then he spent hours in his tiny bedroom, perfecting his licks, reading tablature from guitar magazines, and he was soon composing his own metal tunes, his own anthems, songs that'd one day be massive hits. His signature tune being "Rock N' Roll Bitch."

He'd chased the dream for years. His garage bands in high school and college had sent off demos to record labels, but, alas, they'd never gone anywhere, didn't even garner any rejection letters from most of the labels, except for one from TVT Records, that'd had his band's name misspelled.

With his last band in college, they thought maybe their big break would arrive when their drummer handed the band's demo to rock legend Axl Rose. Axl had

been staying at their city's local luxury hotel, where Sam's drummer worked as a bellboy.

Axl was alone and was dressed in a baggy Public Enemy shirt and tight-fitting leather pants and was sitting down to eat brunch in the hotel's restaurant.

The drummer tiptoed up to Axl's table and adoringly lifted his head up to Axl, in reverence, like it was Jesus Himself. The drummer, smiling widely, and with his hands shaking, his voice cracking, then nervously introduced his band and handed the demo tape to the rock god.

But Axl didn't share any smiles. Instead, Axl jarred to his feet, sneered and growled, let loose a barrage of curse words and invective and snatched and threw the demo tape to the restaurant's marble floor and stomped on the tape with his snakeskin boot, bashed it to bits and loudly suggested the drummer to "fuck off!" and then sat down and coolly ate his brunch in solitude.

Nearby diners gawked, pointed, and gasped in horror, murmured. A snooty manager in a tuxedo swiftly swooped in and led the drummer away, roughly, by the arm and the drummer was immediately fired from his job at the hotel.

2

By the end of Sam's college days, his band was going nowhere. They'd been playing crappy half-empty dive bars and dead parties, often getting booed off stage.

Everyone wanted to hear rap, it'd seemed. That's where popular music was going. It'd been shifting directions, towards rap and away from rock for a while.

Sam was up to his eyeballs in student loans, too. But, fortunately for him, numbers and math had always come easily to him, and he'd cruised through accounting classes with ease, had taken up the subject as his major. After graduating college, with a degree in accounting, he made the most difficult decision of his young life.

He decided to sell out. Join the rat race. Do what he never wanted.

He abandoned his dreams of being a rock star, got a haircut, and joined the corporate world after receiving a generous, 70k per year job offer from a major accounting firm.

Sam bought a set of three-piece suits, loafers, and neckties and began his 9–5, cubicle job. Soon after, he found a wife, a petite, attractive blond who'd been a secretary at his office.

He worked his way up the rungs of the corporate ladder and lived a conventional upper-middle class American existence.

He wore cufflinks. He bought a big house in the suburbs. He got a purebred dog. He got a bright red BMW 5 Series.

Sam had friends he'd play poker with every Saturday night. Sam even built a stereotypical man cave in an addition to the house. It had rock and sports memorabilia, a big screen TV, comfy massage chairs, a pool table, Pac-Man arcade game, foosball, all the necessary accoutrements…

3

By all measures, his life had been a success.

But, from time to time, especially in the car, on the way to work, as he blasted loud rock, he'd lament not pursuing his musical dreams further.

He'd think that maybe if he'd stuck with it, or maybe if he'd been born earlier, when rock mattered more, or if Axl had taken the time to listen to his band's demo instead of smashing it, maybe, just maybe, he could have been something. Something legendary…

While he was rising in the corporate ranks, had recently been promoted, and was crushing it in life, deep down, he couldn't shake the nagging feeling that he'd failed.

He wasn't a rock star. He was just another schmuck.

Another working stiff. Another cog in the machine.

He knew numbers, balance sheets, stock prices, and he saw himself as just a statistic, as stockholder value and profit. He wasn't awesome. He wasn't kicking ass. He wasn't on TV. He wasn't having the fun he knew he could be having if he were playing packed arenas, rocking city after city, touring the world, flying high and riding on steel horses. He'd imagined his life would be like a Bon Jovi video. But it wasn't. And it pissed him off.

Dammit, that was supposed to be him! A star! He was going to be a man other men wanted to be; a man women wanted to be with. He was going to write the songs that would make the whole world stand up and sing! And now, here he was, working in an office, staring at computer screens, in a sweater vest, holding a coffee mug…

It sucked to be so… normal… so mundane… And he felt like such an asshole sometimes when he'd wake up in the early morning, his alarm clock beeping, his back hurting and his knees clicking.

Fucking Nikki Sixx never woke up to an alarm, he'd lament, dragging himself out of bed…

But Sam's worst moments were in the morning when he'd brush his teeth and look in the mirror and see his receding hairline, see his graying temples and the extra pounds on his waistline. He was getting so fucking old. Pretty soon he'd be needing dentures and ass exams…

He started to really detest mirrors, did his best to avoid looking at them…

God, he hated seeing himself like this. As a middle-aged man. A guy young girls would be repulsed by. A guy that people would think of as creepy simply for wanting to fuck young girls.

He hated seeing himself like that and preferred to imagine himself, still, as a handsome young man, a young stallion, with the long flowing sandy brown hair. Him strumming a guitar, on the verge of superstardom, him in a video like "Pour Some Sugar On Me."

He'd still dream that dream. In his corner office, he'd throw back his head, lean back in his leather swivel chair, and let his mind run and fantasize about time traveling back to 1988, opening for Mötley Crüe, and playing to packed stadiums, banging groupies and giving interviews to throngs of reporters. Sometimes in the evenings, in his man cave, he'd play guitar hero video games, pretend the person on his big screen TV was him.

But it wasn't him. And he knew it. And so did his demons. The demons, the voices in his head, the demons of regret and disappointment, those ghosts of his mind that would occasionally rage in and trash his psyche like Tommy Lee's hotel room, torment him about his failed dreams.

But after their short rampage, like any feeling, they'd relent, and the demons would float away, and Sam would realize that he'd been lucky.

Sam would perk up and know he was fortunate to be talented at memorizing, crunching numbers and easily understanding complicated mathematical formulas. He knew that not everyone was. But he was. And he thanked God for that.

And while he might not be exactly who or what he wanted, he had a big house, a slick car, a pretty wife, plenty of friends, and a high-paying job. Overall, his life had turned out alright.

4

Well, it had been a pretty cushy life, until the day he came home early from work to find his wife, bare-naked, being fucked from behind by a near 6'7, big brick

shithouse of a man. The giant was also naked and was slapping Sam's wife's ass with his massive hands, clapping her ass violently. The pair were going at it in the living room, on the wrap-around leather couch, her screaming and wailing like Sam had never heard her…

The first thought that ran through his mind was running upstairs for his gun, shooting them both.

But he instantly thought to every prison TV show or movie he'd ever seen, thought of being in jail for life, terrorized and buttfucked. It wasn't worth it. Nothing was worth that. Not even shooting the bitch, the woman he'd loved with all his heart but now hated more than cancer. The woman who'd just ripped his live beating heart from his chest and taken a big steamy shit on it.

No, no, NO! Now it was only a matter of running, running, fucking RUNNING!

In their throes of passion, the pair hadn't even noticed Sam was there, and he dropped his suitcase, ran out the door, jumped into his car, and peeled out of the driveway, sped off, swerving through traffic, and stopped at a nearby hotel, booked a long-term stay.

There, in his white room, sipping on a tiny bottle of gin from the minibar, he sat back into a pleather seat, wiped the tears from his eyes, and slid open his phone, and began making arrangements, contacting a lawyer and filing for a divorce.

5

Since they were Catholic and didn't believe in divorce, they'd not signed a prenuptial agreement, but, of course, he never expected her to be cheating on him with a Bigfoot.

Sam was initially concerned she'd take everything.

Little did he know she had more money than him.

Through his lawyer's clever forensic accounting, Sam discovered his wife had gotten an inheritance a couple years back, stashed it in an account she'd deftly concealed. The money was from an uncle of hers, a confirmed bachelor who'd owned a successful septic tank company.

It wasn't Bill Gates money, or Jay Z money, but it was a decent chunk of change he found his way into, low 7 figures.

His wife tried her best to dispute it, but there was nothing she could do; the law, the 50/50 split, was ironclad, and Sam found himself a newly minted millionaire.

His anger, the betrayal, was still there throughout the divorce proceedings, but much of it had dissipated once he had that 7-figure check in his hands.

6

Still, Sam was having an identity crisis. Her friends were his friends. Everyone in his neighborhood either suspected or knew that she'd been cheating on him, for a

long time, he'd come to find out. Everyone it seemed, except him, knew that his wife was banging her personal trainer, a strapping young lad, a former NFL lineman, a man eight years his junior.

Thanks to gossip and social media, his coworkers discovered the scandal later too. Every day he'd go to work, see their pitying expressions, the sad and sardonic looks in their eyes.

Worse yet, the personal trainer had moved in with her, and she'd gotten pregnant with the domesticated sasquatch's demon seed…

Oh, that burned him. Made him think again of shooting the bitch. You see, they'd tried, they tried a few times but never had kids. They'd never been sure why it wasn't happening and were planning to seek fertility treatment. But then, of course, Sam came home that day and that all went out the window.

Sam was glad, though, that they didn't have kids, as that'd made things far worse, the divorce far more acrimonious, and he'd happily liquidated his equity in their house after the divorce, and along with his respectable savings, as well as that fat chunk of her secret account he'd siphoned, he was feeling pretty good, financially.

But his conundrum now was what to do? Where to go? Where to live?

Surely, he couldn't stay there, in his neighborhood. At his job. He'd be forever known as a cuck. A loser. The guy whose wife left him for her personal trainer. Nah, fuck that. He couldn't stay. He had to move on to greener pastures.

With his newfound freedom, the financial cushion he had with his big bag of cash, he decided to do something he'd always wanted. Travel. Internationally. To a place he'd always wanted to go. Thailand.

After seeing the movie "The Hangover 2", he'd secretly dreamed of going to Thailand and partying, getting drunk and banging hookers. Waking up with a chicken or a monkey running around in his hotel room. Maybe even banging a ladyboy.

He wanted to run wild in the Land of Smiles. Have some smiles of his own there.

He'd begun thinking of it more and more, going to Thailand. He started watching porn videos from Thailand and his innermost secret Asian fetish only grew, and he no longer felt guilty that there were times he'd closed his eyes and secretly thought of fucking hot Asian chicks as he fucked his wife.

Sam was starting to be happy the bitch had cheated. They'd gotten divorced. He knew his wife, who didn't like travel, could never sit on a plane for 16 hours to fly to the other side of the world. Nor would the bitch ever let him, alone, go to a place like Thailand.

"It's so dangerous! And they don't speak English! What if we get kidnapped and held for ransom? Or wind up on the internet, beheaded by ISIS?" he could imagine her saying.

She thought of any country outside of America as being a dangerous shithole plagued by car bombings, terrorists in ski masks, and war.

Fucking bitch didn't even have a passport. And didn't want one.

But the bitch couldn't tell him anything now. He was free. He'd gotten his check. He'd been listening to Bill Burr's podcast rant about gold-digging whores and felt as if snagging that bag of cash off his ex was a nice little fuck you to all the gold-digging whores that'd extorted cash off dudes. All the lazy bitches who'd gotten crazy alimony payments and robbed men of countless fortunes.

"Mike Tyson, this is FOR YOU!" he thought, sniggering and eying his bulging bank portfolio.

7

The more he thought about it, the more enticing it got, heading out to Thailand.

He could live like a rock star there. He could run the streets like a wild animal, with his dick out, just fucking everything in sight. Maybe he'd never come back.

He read into it, went online, studied immigrating to Thailand. He'd thought maybe he'd open a bar there, on a sun-drenched island, living out his days, lying on a hammock, in the ocean breezes, sipping beers, banging a far younger, bronze-skinned beauty, a girl with a sharply curved, far sexier figure than his wife could ever imagine having, even with all her Botox, yoga, and breast implants!

It was settled. He would do it. He would quit his job. He would end his lease on his divorced guy apartment. With those annoying neighbors and their stupid fucking crying baby. Fuck them. Fuck his wife. Fuck everyone! He was going to Thailand!

Bangkok's neon lights were calling his name! He was going to party in Bangkok, BITCH!

8

Sam loved Thailand from the second he woke up and saw a chain of small rocky islands and translucent crystal blue waters from his first-class window seat.

On the flight, he'd dreamed of that Twilight Zone episode with the troll on the wing of the plane and saw his ex-wife as the troll, tormenting him.

The bitch crawling on the plane's wing, on all fours, baring her fangs, blood dripping from her mouth. The bitch clawing at him with her acrylic talons, those long nails painted blood red, and the bitch leaping like a tiger towards his window.

But to his glee, the bitch stumbled and slid off the wing of the plane, and plummeted like a skydiver with no parachute and Sam flicked her off as she faded ignominiously away, clawing and hissing at him fecklessly as she fell back to hell where the bitch belonged…

Then he woke and she was gone. The bitch was dead. Or at least in his mind she was, and that was good enough.

Peering out the window, gliding into Bangkok, all Sam could see was the sun, the brilliant bright orb lighting the tropical landscape in the effulgence of its solar glow. Sam used his hand to shield his eyes, squinted, and looked down, marveled

at the skyline of the metropolis from the plane, its towering glass-plated buildings, one of them having a fragmented, funky shape, and one of them with a tip that looked like a spiraling temple.

The place was just as amazing as it looked in the movies!

He felt like he was in a movie, too, when he arrived. It was the "Hangover Part 4," and he was the star. Or better yet, he was finally a rock star, living out his rock n' roll dream, and he blasted Ratt in his earbuds as he stood in the immigration line.

Along with taking massive doses of Xanax and Zoloft, he had recently been meditating and listening to relaxation music, to keep himself calm, keep his anger and depression in check, but he decided to delete all the meditation music off his phone, now that he was in Thailand.

Fuck that calm shit.

He would be listening to only hard rock from now on. And only choice shit from the 70s, starting with Kiss and Aerosmith. Tons of 80s party rock, too, of course, like Mötley Crüe's "Girls, Girls, Girls", and Whitesnake's 1987 self-titled record, and his playlists would abruptly end at the early 90s, with Slaughter and Skid Row.

His playlists were especially heavy on the AC/DC, and he also had lots of butt metal like Warrant, Winger, and Poison. "Nothing But A Good Time" becoming his new anthem.

There'd be no depressing Seattle grungy lumberjack dickheads and definitely no weak corporate bullshit like Coldplay or pansies like The Strokes.

Sam would only be listening to kick ass, high energy ROCK N' FUCKING ROLL!

He was in Thailand, motherfucker!

9

Sam collected his luggage and stepped from the icy cool blast of the airport into the stifling midday Bangkok heat.

Being from Minnesota, he'd been through hot summers but had never experienced heat quite as sticky and swampy as Bangkok's. But he loved it! The whole place was like a sauna. Sweat pooled between his shoulder blades, and as the warm air tingled him all over, he felt his creaky old joints relax and uncoil, and the beads of sweat on his forehead felt detoxifying.

Sam felt young. Like a new man. Like a million bucks!

Sam rocked to Mötley Crüe's "Kickstart My Heart" and Ozzy's "Crazy Train" in his earbuds as he rode in a pink taxi to The Landmark Bangkok, his posh, five-star hotel in downtown Bangkok.

Goddamn the chicks in Bangkok were smoking hot! he marveled, upon arrival, getting whiplash from gawking around so much at the numerous smoking hot babes all around the hotel's elegant lobby…

Shortly after checking in, he showered, changed into summer clothes and sprayed on cologne, popped Ritalin to do away with the jet lag and he readied up for a spree. A fuck spree. A pussy spree. A mass shooting rampage of dick. His cock a loaded weapon…

Sam burst out of the hotel like a lion from its cage and hit the city like a fucking tornado. A tornado of perversion, an F-5 full of pent up sexual rage.

For his first hooker fuck he went to the dirty massage place next door to his hotel, paid 3 sexy young bitches to bend over and banged them one at a time, for a couple minutes each, finally dropping his load in the third, the one with the roundest ass.

Blasting L.A. Guns' "Sex Action" in his earbuds, as he tapped that sweet Asian hooker ass, he cried out, "I LOVE BANGKOK! I LOVE THAILAND! LOOOOOOONG LIVE THE KING!! LONG LIVE THE KING!" and he kept yelling "I love Bangkok!" as he madly porked the caramel skinned dollfaces…

10

"This place is pussy paradise!" Sam muttered to himself, sipping a cold mug of beer at the Hooters on Sukhumvit Road, gazing at the waitress's wiggly ass in her orange shorts and rubbernecking at the lovelies passing by on the street.

Sam was smitten with the Thai talent. He was in awe of how thin, curvy, and pretty the Thai girls were. They were so gentle, girly and feminine too. Nothing like the masculine porkers, disgusting tubs of lard so many American women were. The cows! Sam hadn't seen this many hot babes since college!

Popping dick pills, he hit every red-light district and nihilistically fucked every hooker he could, be they massage girls, bar girls, street walkers, he fucked them all. He even banged his tall skinny college-aged cleaning lady; paid extra to fuck her up her tight little ass.

He got soapy massages. He went to blowjob bars and had his knob greased while he slammed shots of tequila.

Sam was doing it! Living the dream! Running wild like a maniac! An escaped zoo animal! A horny white baboon mounting everything in sight!

11

Sam spent his first couple weeks in Bangkok blindingly drunk, popping a cycle of Ritalin, Xanax and Viagra, and fucking every sizzling hot Asian slapper that struck his fancy.

He'd spend the rest of his time sitting out on his hotel balcony, playing on his tablet, watching 1980s rock videos on YouTube and sipping cold beers.

His mind occasionally wandering, he'd tilt his head and stare wordlessly at the palm trees by the pool behind his hotel. He'd watch the palm trees sway in the humid breeze and would marvel at how they'd bend, those trees. But they never broke. Sam wanted to be like that, be like that tree, taking whatever Mother Nature, Man threw its way. Bending but not breaking.

But he couldn't be that stoic. Truth was, deep down, the demons of regret clawed from their graves and returned to plague him. He started to miss his old life, his house, his man cave, even his ex-wife and the buttermilk pancakes and strips of bacon she'd make on Saturday mornings.

He missed his buddies, their poker games, and them together, drinking brews, eating nachos, watching football on Sundays. He missed his coworkers and the banter about Netflix shows by the water cooler… He missed his dog, the goofy golden retriever, playing fetch with him in the park…

And even though he was on an epic ass plundering spree, after the first 20 hookers he fucked, he was experiencing a diminishing return of joy. Soon, he started feeling nothing at all, basically like he was masturbating into a bag of warm flesh and bones.

It wasn't that the Thai hookers made him feel sleazy.

He'd banged a couple call girls during his lonely days after his marriage ended, back in the States, and American hookers were always awful, always rushed and had a sense of shame to them. They were never fun. They made him feel like a big stinky piece of shit.

But Thai hookers were different. They made it enjoyable, sensuous, made it feel like a normal thing. They kissed him. They smiled like they meant it. They were passionate, excited lovers, fucking gracefully and with expert precision.

The first week or two, they were incredible. Sam had imagined he'd be in heaven, always, fucking like this, fucking these exotic beauties, women far younger than

him, him porn-fucking these college aged girls, girls that'd never talk to him in America, or would call him "sir" or "Mr. Philips" if they ever did.

But, somehow, the more hooker ass he got, the emptier he felt.

And one cloyingly hot afternoon, after a heavy binge of late morning drinking and Xanax, it occurred to him why he was feeling down. It was because he'd failed.

What he'd wanted to do, be a rock star, that was no longer an option. Not only was he too old, but no one listened to rock anymore. No one cared about rock.

Nowadays, it was all rap, EDM, pop. And all that music sucked. It all sounded the same. It was shit.

Not only today's shitty music, but Sam felt disgusted at the turn popular culture had taken, too. People these days were selling their soul merely for viral fame, lip-synching and dancing like a fucktard for 6 seconds on TikTok.

There was such a thing as an "Instagram Influencer." An annoying douchebag with a man-bun or stuck-up bitch posing and preening for selfies.

He'd clutch his tablet in revulsion, the device burning under his fingernails, and he'd surf social media sites, snarling, thinking, "These were today's stars? What was this shit? Why would anyone want to see this?"

Even worse, he discovered that there were people getting paid millions of dollars to play video games. Video games! Why would anyone be stupid enough to watch someone else PLAY video games?

The fact that YouTube video game stars like PewDiePie and Ninja actually existed made him want to vomit.

E-Sports? Professional gaming? This was a thing? A sport? What the fuck?

Playing video games was fun, sure, and he'd loved playing Nintendo as a kid. But watching someone else play video games? That was pathetic. People packing arenas to see THAT? Watch a scrawny nerd in a chair, with a headset, staring at a computer, playing VIDEO GAMES?? People PAID to watch that?

Sam just couldn't wrap his head around it. What happened to rock n' roll? Getting head in the backseat in the parking lot after a Mötley Crüe concert?

It was then reality set in. Sam realized his youth really was over. He was old. When the moment comes that you think the younger generation sucks, their music sucks, you don't "get" their hobbies, and you don't understand them, that's when you're officially old. He knew it. He knew the sad truth.

And, if anything, too, he felt bad for the kids today. He'd see them, sitting together, only staring at their phones, never talking. That was all they did. He'd read online how the younger people were having less sex, too, just playing their stupid fucking phone games. That must be why they liked E-Sports. It was all they knew. Fucking sad.

He was glad he'd not grown up with smartphones and social media and E-Sports. Sam knew how lucky he was to have seen bands like Mötley Crüe. Watched MTV when it still mattered. Went to shows and parties where people talked to each other and got laid.

But those days were gone. It was the 2020s.

His time had come and passed. He could see jazz and swing band guys probably thinking the same about rock n' roll all those years ago. Now it was his turn to be a dinosaur. He had to face it.

Bon Jovi was gone. Guns N' Roses were pathetic old fat guys, old farts with hip replacements and hearing aids. Guns N' Roses were hairy old geezers living off nostalgia. He'd seen a recent concert of theirs, and it was dreadful. Seeing it made him feel so old. Especially Axl Rose.

Axl Rose, who he'd come to detest, looked like a Karen meme. It was sad. He all of a sudden pitied Axl.

Axl Rose, the rock god, who stomped on, smashed his dreams to the floor like an insect, Axl was old as fuck and fat as shit. Axl had once been such a beautiful man. Now look at him. A beached whale. Pitiful!

Not that Sam was much better. He too was an old fat guy. The lines on his forehead kept getting deeper, like slash marks from the scythe of time. The corners of his mouth were sagging farther and farther down, like a colorless rainbow.

And he'd been seeing pictures on Facebook of his college classmates, his former bandmates, and they all looked so fucking withered and old. Seeing their pictures, how aged they were, made him feel worse than when he'd look at himself in the mirror…

Dammit. He was such a fat old fuck.

What's worse, he was an old fatso living off his ex-wife's cash. Cash from shit, literally, from septic tanks.

Sam had never hated anyone as much as he hated himself. He saw himself in the reflection from his glass coffee table and winced like he just smelled a violent fart.

He grabbed a bottle of Black Label, guzzled a healthy slug of the smoky potion. He started thinking of heading back to America, maybe starting his own accounting firm.

But, for the time being, he'd try to enjoy the rest of his time in Thailand, bang hookers at a more sensible pace and maybe go see some culture, some museums, temples, the Emerald Buddha. He'd see wild elephants, tigers and shit and pagodas and teak triangle roof buildings. He'd hit the islands, eat coconuts and watch waves crashing into white sand beaches.

Shit, maybe he'd visit other countries in Asia while he had the chance, like Japan or Hong Kong…

Sam decided to go for a cold drink at the bar out by the pool. Getting a healthy dose of sun would make him feel better. It always did.

To his delight, by the bar sat one of the most beautiful women he'd ever laid eyes upon. Early 20s. 5'5. Luscious skin the color of mahogany. Coal black, glossy waist-length hair. Long legs, trim waist, perky tits, big sloe-colored eyes, and an angelic face like a chinadoll with cheekbones so high and sharp they could cut a hole in the sky.

It was like she was an angel, glowing in the sun. She had the light!

She was sitting all alone at the bar, and, even better, she was flashing her perfectly white teeth, grinning broadly, and staring right at Sam, with a sparkle in her eyes.

Tipsy, he stumbled over, introduced himself. “Nok’s the name” she replied, tilting her head coquettishly, brushing a wispy strand of shiny hair behind her ear.

Sam thought the white bow in her hair was the cutest thing he’d ever seen in his life, and he was ecstatic when he found that Nok spoke near perfect English.

Nok understood everything he said and they made small talk and she laughed at all his cheesy pickup lines and corny jokes, making him feel like a comedian.

When he asked her up to his room, he expected her to quote a price. But she didn’t. He couldn’t believe his luck. A girl this hot. She actually liked him! He didn’t even have to pay for it!

As soon they entered the room, they were on each other like white on rice, and minutes later, naked, in the king-sized bed, Nok was doing things to him in bed that he’d only seen in porno flicks. Nasty, crazy, double jointed shit. Acrobatic moves he didn’t know possible. Things his ex-wife could NEVER do.

They spent the next few days together, mostly in bed, fucking, watching TV, and ordering room service meals.

He loved waking up next to her, seeing her perfect facial structure, and hugging her soft, warm body, his hands on her sculpted curves. He'd feel like he was in heaven with her in bed next to him, her long black hair splayed out on the pillows like a raven's wing…

12

He did the math and realized how much further his money could take him in a lower cost country like Thailand. He also thought he could do remote accounting work online.

He could make this work, in Thailand, and how could he leave a girl like Nok behind? He knew Nok would be miserable in the cold and snow in America, away from her family and friends.

Hell, he'd probably also be miserable in America, especially without her, having to return to all the frown-faced people in America and their PC bullshit and their bitching and moaning about race and politics and trans people. Not that he hated anyone, but he didn't care about any of that shit…

America really was becoming a dumpster fire, he thought. The news from there worsening all the time. Always mass shootings, riots, Twitter mobs outraged over a stupid thing someone said, everyone always offended about something, everyone such crybaby wimps, everyone whining about dumb, meaningless shit like cultural appropriation.

Everyone was victimized and offended and outraged. And there were so many keyboard warriors ignoring America's real problems like budget deficits, failing schools, genuine systemic racism, homelessness, and income inequality.

Instead these idiots were going for the low-hanging fruit, creating things to be angry about, and attacking standup comedians, of all people.

No one believed in free speech anymore. People couldn't ignore opinions, movies or jokes they didn't like. Everything had to be deleted and canceled. Everyone was getting banned from somewhere. And everyone was cowering and apologizing to the rampaging, bloodthirsty vampires of political correctness.

What the hell happened to America? Sam thought, shaking his head in contempt.

For all its bluster, Sam saw America for what it really had become, an overdeveloped third world country. A corrupt, broken, lawless wasteland, and not much better, and in many ways far worse off than Thailand.

It was miserable, coming to see his own country like this, viewing it from afar, with a new set of eyes. But it was what it was. And he'd felt incredibly fortunate to have escaped to Thailand, feeling like he'd broken out of the for-profit prison that is today's America…

13

Sam had come to realize, too, that Thailand was not only a more peaceful, saner country, but it was still a man's world. All of Asia was. There were sexy women in

tight miniskirts everywhere. Every stewardess he'd seen at the airport was a young knockout that smiled at him. None of them were some angry old flabby lady with a bad attitude.

There were hot women, classy women in elegant clothing everywhere. To him, the women in Asia looked like women SHOULD look.

And all around Sukhumvit, the area of Bangkok he was staying, there were go-go bars, hostess bars, dirty massage shops, and chicks in lingerie on posters and billboards. They were chicks with nice figures, too, not some gross blubbery sack of shit being idolized like that disgusting Lizzo singer.

He couldn't imagine a place like Sukhumvit existing in America. It'd be attacked. There'd be protests in the streets, beta-males up in arms, Karens throwing Molotov cocktails!

But there were no violent Karens here, and Sam loved how he saw so few fat chicks. Nearly every woman was at least do-able!

There was no prohibition against fat-shaming and that was awesome! Women were expected to look like women. Have curves, be thin, wear make-up and be beautiful. And a man could look however he wanted. As long as he had cash.

And another thing Sam loved about Asia was that, unlike America, people in Asia actually liked white people.

They had skin-whitening creams to make themselves look white and nose jobs to make themselves look like him. His white skin was something people

complimented him on. Something they admired and aspired to have, not like it was something terrible or a sign of his "privilege."

Sam had grown quite tired of many of the liberals in America making people feel guilty about simply being white.

Here, in Thailand, he wasn't made to feel like a piece of shit just for who he was. He could be a straight white male, and that was okay. And it was not that he hated anyone, or thought he was any better than anyone, but before he'd left America, he was starting to feel like the enemy, vilified by popular culture, made to feel like he was oppressed and hated, just because of who he was.

To him, it was the extremism of America. Instead of really having an equal, diverse society, the country was simply shifting gears, from hating gays and people of color to hating straight white men.

Now he was the enemy!

But not in Asia. Not in Thailand. In Thailand, he was welcomed. He was a foreigner, a "farang" as they called him, but that was okay. Thai people smiled at him. They were laidback, humble, and respectful. He felt far safer. He could easily walk the streets of Bangkok at night and not worry about being robbed by a gangbanger or gunned down by a crazed incel mass shooter Boogaloo freak.

Then he started reading OAN news reports on his tablet about crazy left radicals like Antifa in America calling for the abolishment of police departments! Doing away with police? It was the stupidest thing he'd ever heard! America was becoming like the movie "The Purge"!!!!

Watching Fox News online, he saw more riots in the streets! Every day, there were riots somewhere, by radical leftists, Marxist nutjobs. He'd watch "Louder with Crowder" and see white people being attacked in grocery stores and nothing being done about it!

It was becoming like the Cultural Revolution in Mao's China! Complete insanity!

America was starting to scare the shit out of him! He NEVER wanted to go back there!

It was settled, in his mind. He'd stay in Thailand. He'd never go back to America. Vindicated, he knew that he'd made the right decision, coming to Thailand, after all…

14

Sam told Nok over a pancake breakfast that he wanted to stay in Thailand, forever, and that he wanted to open a bar in one of the islands, like Koh Samui, and it turned out that's where she was from.

She said she could help him open the bar. It was magic. It was serendipity! And it was at this moment that he knew. That this was fate. He was to be with her. This was it. Everything in his life had led him to this moment.

He couldn't be a rock star. He couldn't be Axl Rose. But after seeing what a joke Fat Axl had wound up being, he didn't care. He didn't even want to be that

anymore. Be some old guy in spandex pants singing songs from 40 years ago. Fuck that!

No way, there was a peace in anonymity, a tranquility in escaping the polarized cesspool of acrimony and hate that had become modern America.

He'd be spending his final days aging gracefully, running a bar on the beach, lying on a hammock.

That'd be a far better life than having millions of people pitying and laughing at you like they were doing to the Fat Asshole Axl Rose. The fucking Karen!

"Fuck you, Axl Rose! I'm glad you broke my demo to pieces! I'm glad I never became washed-up, a has-been like you!" he gleefully thought to himself…

He thought to VH1's "Behind The Music" about Poison and their bassist Bobby Dall saying something about how he'd never wanted to be a musician, he'd wanted to be a rock star and he'd done that. He'd accomplished that dream…

Sam was likeminded. He didn't give a shit about the music. He never learned to read music. He hated bands like Rush and Dream Theater, those annoying bands that musician snobs masturbated to. He couldn't care less about music theory or any of that pretentious shit.

He wanted the lifestyle. The pussy. The money. Traveling the world to exotic locations. That's what he wanted.

And he had it, escaping to Thailand like this, fucking all these exotic, beautiful young girls.

His wallet was so fat it wouldn't fold. He had rock star money! He was a millionaire! He was rich! He was getting ass! He was in fucking Thailand! Everything had worked out for the better. And he would never leave. He would stay in Thailand forever!

Sam decided it. Then and there. He'd marry this girl.

He proposed marriage to her later that morning, as they lay together in bed. He was naked and drunk, floating warmly on Xanax and had stuttered when making his proposal. He'd been worried she'd laugh it off as drunk talk. But, to his delight, with no delay, she said yes. SHE SAID YES!

THEY WERE TYING THE KNOT!

15

Sam was so excited that it was all coming together. He was so elated that a girl this beautiful was marrying him.

He didn't want to waste any time. He didn't want her to have even a millisecond to change her mind.

Scrambling out of the covers, jumping out of bed and stumbling up to his feet, he clumsily pulled on his camouflage cargo shorts, stepped into his Gucci sandals and twisted on his black AC/DC singlet and he ordered her up too and told her they were going NOW to be married.

She laughingly complied, collected her clothes from off the floor, and they ordered a Grab car, then rode down to the courthouse and he paid extra to have the papers signed and expedited THAT DAY.

They then returned to the hotel, ate an extravagant lobster meal in the hotel's restaurant. Then they retired to his suite where they drank champagne, watched superhero movies and fucked. His head spinning, he curled up to her tits like a baby, and passed out in the early evening. And when he woke up the next morning, around the crack of dawn, she was gone.

Lifting his groggy head up and looking out to the floor to ceiling windows, he saw the pink light of morning spreading in from underneath a cluster of dark black clouds. Sam then noticed his phone was silently flashing.

He clumsily fumbled at the nightstand next to the bed, scooped up the device, and saw that Nok had sent him a text saying she'd needed to go back to her home, up north, in Esan, to make arrangements for a formal wedding, a traditional Buddhist wedding, at the temple, and that a week or two later, she'd have him come up there to meet her parents and have the ceremony.

She also requested he pay her folks a "sinsot," a dowry, of $100,000, and provided him the bank account info for the transfer.

Sam wasted no time in transferring the funds to Bangkok Bank. It was the least he could do. He imagined her parents happy and wai-ing him in the threshold of their

triangle roofed, nut-brown, traditional Thai house, the house probably on tall stilts, probably made of teak, with thickets of jungle, palm fronds and mangrove surrounding it.

He could see her parents in that doorway, her father in pantaloons, her mother in long golden robes, her parents bowing and welcoming him triumphantly, like a champion!

16

They talked online, video chatted the next couple days. In the background, it looked like she was in a small bedroom, not the big house that she said her family had up north.

He also remembered her originally saying she was from Koh Samui and asked her about that, and she said that she was from there before but that her family now lives in Esan.

It'd also occurred to him that, in his pilled-up, drunken stupor and haste to tie the knot, that he'd not signed a prenup. Whatever, he figured, he'd hire a lawyer, have that ironed out later.

17

Monsoon season had arrived, and it was raining just as heavily in Esan as it was in Bangkok. Holding his tablet like it was a talisman, he gazed longingly at his new

wife as they spoke via video chat, but it was sort of hard to hear Nok talk over the rattle of the rain pattering at the roof of her house.

She told him that tomorrow her cousin would stop by to pick up the amulet she'd left over there in the hotel room.

Before he could ask where she'd left it, she hurried off the call, saying her mother needed help cooking, and she air-kissed him goodnight.

18

The following afternoon, the rain had stopped, and slivers of golden sunshine were slicing through the heavy gray and white blotches of clouds blanketing the sky.

Seeing the sunshine made Sam feel better and he started his daily diary entry by writing, "I love Bangkok!"

Nok's cousin showed up at around this time, knocking hard on the door, shaking it.

But it was not only him, he was flanked by 3 other guys. All muscly and dressed in black shirts and black jeans and all with tattoos covering the entirety of their bodies. 3 of the 4 had longish black hair shaved at the sides and ponytails in the back, except for one guy, a dude missing several teeth, whose smallish head was shaved bald.

The men pushed in roughly as he opened the door, one saying something in broken English about “she leave thing on balcony” and the men swarmed and huddled around Sam, forcing him forward to the balcony, his 17th floor balcony overlooking the Olympic-sized pool.

He screamed for help, but one of the men slapped a palm over Sam’s lips, silencing his cries. Shivers raced down Sam’s spine and his heart beat like a jackhammer.

As they shoved and surged forward, through his spacious suite, he knew. He knew the score. He knew from the warning blogs he’d read, and on the plane over he’d read Stephen Leather’s novel “Private Dancer.”

He’d taken precautions, but the “Land of Scams” had gotten him. He’d been scammed. The last few days were a sham. A farce. A fake. A performance. A simulation. An X-Rated Truman Show.

It had been a grand fake. The girl was a snake, an actress, a ghost and a vampire. Everything was a lie!

Everything was a simulacrum!

The palm trees out there were probably fake. The smiles, those thin smiles were fake too. Hell, the sun was even fake, he’d bet, some great big lamp installed by the TAT, the geezers and their cowering manservants in pantaloons.

Overpowered, the sweaty palm cupped and muzzled his mouth and Sam wriggled and whimpered and tasted its saltiness.

One of the men, who smelled strongly of cigarettes, was muttering what sounded like orders in Thai. One of them was giggling like a hyena.

Like a rugby scrum, the huddled mass burst out to the balcony. As he neared the balcony railing and saw down at the pool below, he was suddenly grateful for at least one thing…

He was grateful that- for at least a short time- he got to be a rock star. He got to feel like one. Live like one. Drink all day and fuck lots of women. Stay in a luxury hotel room in an exotic location. He got to live that life.

But it was now over. And that was okay. He could go in peace.

Then he released. Let his twisting, fighting limbs go limp.

He accepted the percentage. And he quit the dream.

ALIEN IMMIGRATION TO THE IMPERIAL CITY

A tropical sun hung high in the baby blue morning sky, caking the crowd in its molten golden patina.

The aliens outside queued and huddled in clumps. They'd come as early as 4 a.m. The line of aliens already spilling into the busy road parallel to the massive government complex.

Some aliens defensively held umbrellas to block the sun's scorching rays, while others hid, drenched in sweat, shielding themselves with thick stacks of paperwork.

At the head of the line, a skeletal man in what looked like an airline pilot's uniform stood in defense of the complex's massive, impenetrable blue glass doors. The doors standing nearly 90 feet high. In his curled, white latex-gloved hand he

clutched a pyrometer, which he pointed at the aliens' heads, beeping and clicking at each skull.

A bugle played from somewhere above. The aliens then shifted their feet and began to shuffle inside, into air conditioning so cool it was like walking inside a refrigerator, and the aliens were made to walk backward as they passed through the mouth of the gargantuan sliding glass doors.

Once inside, the aliens were met with a lion tamer without a lion. He was a severe-looking man, with small green eyes, a nimbus of frizzy red hair, a hairy red chest, and he wore only aqua-blue genie pants. His bare feet were swollen, ashen and without toes. Sweating profusely, he was swinging a leather whip, which he snapped as he instructed, in broken English, that each alien perform three consecutive dabs in order to carry on further.

The obese, infirm, elderly, disabled or any alien unable to perform his instruction either had to pay a small fine or just go fuck right off.

Passing the lion tamer, the aliens shouted their passport numbers, backwards, at the next security pillar, a sumo wrestler in a tutu, and upon the sumo's nodding approval, the aliens entered the Fuck-You-Machine, which was a combination MRI machine/X-ray/conveyer belt/baggage inspection/peep show screening instrument.

The aliens lay stomach flat, face down on a pallet, and were then fed into the Fuck-You-Machine, via its moving conveyer belt, screened, and then slid down a towering, twisting slide that fed into a five-foot-deep ball pit filled with stolen cell phones...

After swimming, wading out of the pit of stolen phones, the aliens were greeted by a circus clown in a noose necktie; the clown looked like Ronald McDonald and had spring legs and a grossly enlarged right hand and incised into the clown's enlarged right hand was a QR code, which the clown dipped into a bucket of candy red paint.

The clown slapped each alien on the forehead with a red print of the QR code, providing the aliens a code that allowed them the opportunity to receive a number and maybe a chance to see the Snakeman.

Aliens fresh from the tub of stolen cell phones each received their QR code, via head slap, and then proceeded further, following a set of red arrows down a dark feeder hallway, which narrowed to a crawl space leading to an asshole-shaped latex hole the aliens were made to force themselves through before the aliens finally emerged, panting and on their bellies, into the stomach of the complex.

The complex was big, bright, even colder than the entryway, and ovular as an egg. Its center was hollow but lining its edges were three layers, three floors of bureaus. Each floor had offices for offices and offices for stamps and offices for stamps required to receive other stamps, offices for stamps that allowed for further documentation and apostilles and offices for documents requiring copies and signatures and verification, verifications of verifications, and, finally, an office requiring perfunctory repetitions of each or any sequence… Each and any sequence accomplished in an unyielding, algebraic-like sequence difficult to explain but understood eventually- with due diligence and a comfortable pair of shoes...

The aliens followed the arrows. Immigration officers in spacesuits hopped by on penis-shaped pogo sticks, whizzed by on skateboards and Segways and answered and asked no questions.

A pudgy alien in smart goggles, a white poncho and white latex gloves yelled at his hand machine, his voice muffled by his N95 mask.

“Look, if ya don’t take care of that fucking reptile, I leave the WORST REVIEW EVER on TripAdvisor!”

A pack of bare-chested Cossacks riding Siberian tigers thundered by the weary, incoming aliens; the Cossacks yelping and twirling nagaikas and having an entirely unclear purpose.

The high-arched ceilings of the five-domed complex were video screens showing advertisements for various sanitary products, face masks, home delivery services, and robot parts. Intermittently the screens displayed the national flag in bright red and green bursts that’d hit and illuminate every angle of the complex like Christmas lights.

At the end of the red arrow path was a bureaucrat in a black scuba suit and matching, short black cape. He had no face and thrust a flamethrower aloft, the little blue flame at its nozzle burning brightly in the chilled air.

The scuba suit bureaucrat had sensory organs like a bat. Holding his flamethrower like a hose, he then began blasting ropes of fire, torching aliens in socks and sandals, or the non-blind wearing sunglasses inside, or any alien ending a sentence with the word “dog.” The bureaucrat setting the offenders alight and flicking sign language phrases as the accursed became running red and black balls of flames.

The accursed ashes would then be promptly hoovered up by an officer spacesuit; the spacesuits collecting the remnants like wayward golf balls before flushing them down an exposed public toilet/trash can/enema machine at the corner of the complex, right next to the hot pink escalator that’d preemptively move in the opposite direction of anybody trying to walk up or down it.

Those lucky enough to pass the faceless scuba suit bureaucrat were ready for the next leg of the immigratory process. The Crocodile Cunt.

The Crocodile Cunt was perched on a floating lily pad in a small manmade lotus pond in the center of the complex. A series of concrete box steps led to the Crocodile Cunt. The Crocodile’s mouth yawned wide open, and inside the dip of the mouth were a set of marbles, on each marble a number.

Aliens, one at a time, ran, skipped or jumped over the concrete steps, up to the Cunt, and attempted to snatch out a marble ball.

A few were successful, plucking out the marble ball, then dashing off to wait in the line for the line for the room of mirrors.

But, of course, not every alien was so lucky. Many had his/her fingers, hand or arm bitten off. The amputees crying out, gushing blood and plunging, splashing and crashing and sinking underneath the lotus pond’s surface. The pond’s gurgly, reddening waters sucking the aliens down, faster than an alcoholic guzzling the day’s first beer…

The surviving aliens were then made to present their marble to a chatelaine in a wedding dress and black veil, the chatelaine armed with a solid gold AK-47. The chatelaine guarding a turnstile and shooting dead those aliens stupid enough to attempt any sleight of hand, knock-knock jokes, or other trickeration…

Aliens then churned through the turnstile and followed along another set of red arrows leading to a room that led to the room of mirrors. Once QR face scans were completed by a flying dildo drone, a set of jagged teeth doors swiped open. Ten or so aliens were allowed to pass at a time.

In the room of mirrors, a rotund green man with a shark fin haircut stood naked, arms clapping at the ceiling, his Buddha belly jiggling, rippling like a big bowl of Jell-O. His mouth stretched into a happy grin. Bruce Springsteen's "Glory Days" played loudly from a roving speaker bot, and the green man's upper body swayed, out of rhythm, to the beat.

The shark fin man's feet were nailed, like a hasty crucifixion, to the reception desk, and at his side stood a ladyboy officer in tap pants.

The ladyboy officer had a most masculine face, a perfectly angled square jaw and big bulbous breasts. Then Officer Ladyboy dropped to her knees, bowing in front of the shark fin man, kowtowing, then she started suckling, slurping and playing his floppy penis like a flute.

Aliens passed by, were required to fist-bump the shark fin man, then followed more red arrows, arrows that forked down two dark hallways in two directions.

One set of arrows led to another mirrored room that was a gas chamber. Its doors slapping shut. The entering aliens euthanized by happy gas. The floor falling open, the aliens dropping below into the pit of captured cannibal crypto bros, like raw meat tossed to lions in a zoo…

The other set of red arrows led to the lair of the Snakeman. Upon approach, the aliens felt the air become far colder, so cold they could see their breath fogging before them. Then they started to smell a strong scent of sandalwood as they legged toward the lair…

The Snakeman's lair was an open-doored, hotel type room that was made from pure gold.

Gold everything. Floors, walls, cornices, ceilings, TV, bed, chairs. Everything shiny, glinty pure gold, everything glittering in the room's arctic temps… There was even a golden effigy of the rapper Trinidad James, caked in golden dust… The rapper's effigy crucified with golden nails at the entrance of the open doorway…

A faint wail of bagpipes sounded from a roving speaker bot…

The Snakeman was a manbeast in invisible clothes. He had the torso, legs, chest and arms of a gangly human being, and the head of a king cobra.

The Snakeman sat cross-legged upon a solid gold stool, and his harem of seraglios, each painted gold, were shackled, ankle and wrist, by lengthy golden chain leashes affixed to the ceiling, and the seraglios either twerked somberly to the bagpipes' wail or burned sandalwood incense and prayed and licked at the Snakeman's feet.

Upon the aliens' entry, the Snakeman, in a voice that sounded like a parent scolding a child, demanded each alien jump up and down twice. Then recite his/her passport number, frontwards, backwards. Then the aliens had to spin in a circle. Then do a pirouette while reciting their passport number in multiples of five. Then do a headstand and recite their passport number divided by two, then by three and rounded to the nearest decimal.

Aliens who spoke any of the requested numbers incorrectly fell through a trapdoor in the floor… The trapdoor leading to the pit of captured cannibal crypto bros…

Those aliens who answered the passport riddles correctly were bestowed upon them a chip, an electronic chip, implanted into the jawbone, the chip slapped onto the aliens' faces by a seraglio; the chip allowing the aliens the honor and privilege of existing in the Kingdom. In 30 days, though, if the aliens hadn't evacuated, or died of the Virus, they'd be required to repeat the immigratory process.

As an exit, the fortunate aliens were moved, via travelator, to a pink, lotus-shaped shuttle pad, outside the government complex, where the aliens were fitted into bubble wrap suits and then launched by a slingshot that resembled a pair of thong underwear.

The aliens were then free to run through a minefield full of rampaging Cossacks, tigers, wild boars and elephants. The aliens free to flee to the safety of the pagoda gates framing the Imperial City.

BANGKOK VOODOO DOLL APP

Easing into the tuk-tuk's backseat, Bird looped her arms around my neck. Her head was thrown back and her face was hanging like a half-moon over her pill-blue surgical mask. Staring at me pensively, her hooded eyes thinned.

Fake lashes fluttering, she tilted her head sideways, and shoved me off her, playfully, and muttered a Thai curse word as she whisked her raven black hair over her right shoulder.

Then she lowered her mask, revealing puckered, pouty pink lips. It surprised me she'd even wanted to breathe, with the pandemic and all, not to mention the

city's atrocious air pollution. Sukhumvit Road's toxic vapors were their usual gnarly, rendering respiration akin to sucking on a running tailpipe.

Coughing at my hands, I felt warm wet droplets of breath and noticed that, for some unholy reason, I wasn't wearing a face mask. I rarely leave home without one. Even before the pandemic I'd always wear a mask. Bangkok air necessitates wearing a mask. It's deadly, the Bangkok air. Albeit it's not as deadly and terrifying as the roads…

The roads, oh, the fucking roads. The roads in Thailand are a damn warzone, a chaotic jungle of rubber, concrete, and steel…

But traffic was too clogged to be malevolent. It was moving slower than a retard on Xanax.

Bird's pink lips curved into a smile. Her teeth white and thick as pearls. Then her shimmering smile slowly died. Her face shifting from a smile to scowl and her opal eyes dropped as she whipped out her phone from her ass and flicked the Oppo on.

She then started stabbing at the Voodoo Doll app, happily slashing and cutting her ex-boyfriend's threadbare body with a variety of kitchen knives. The poor bastard's pudgy mug had been photoshopped over the doll's head and his contorted face seemed to be quivering.

Sneering devilishly, she muttered, "He no love me…" in her singsong Thai accent, hitting a lingering down tone on that last vowel. She shoved the phone back down her ass and dug out a hot pink motorcycle helmet from under the seat, strapped it on and lowered the mirrored visor. I could see my reflection in it. My face flushed crimson and my forehead crinkled under my silver cowboy hat.

I was wondering why the fuck we were in a tuk-tuk, anyway. I never take one of these things. They're mostly for the tourists. I've been in Bangkok for 7 years. I'm no tourist. Though, in the eyes of the natives, because I'm a "farang," a paleface foreigner, I always will be, in a way, a tourist, no matter how long I stay…

Looking forward, I spotted the driver slumped at the wheel. The skeletal, late middle-aged man, with a face reminiscent of a Thai Snoop Dogg, was gurgling, spitting up chunks of what looked like purply pieces of puke.

“Hey! HEY! Who gave coronavirus to the tuk-tuk driver?” I squawked as I gawked, suddenly gasping as I felt a surge of acid scratching at the back of my throat.

Then I swung my head to see Bird on the back of a nearby motorcycle taxi. She was waving me over, like a traffic cop. Jumping out of the tuk-tuk, I threw the driver a 100 baht note, in case he didn’t die.

Then I mounted the motorcycle, sitting behind Bird, and I snuggled up to her. Hugged my arms around her soft, slender hourglass frame. My arms on her tender hot flesh, I felt a rush at the silky touch of her bare midriff under her baby blue half-shirt. Her light brown, milk chocolatey skin looking so damn delicious I could eat it.

I was a happy cannibal. And we rocketed to high speeds on that bike, the driver ragging on his 2-stroke engine, the engine buzzing like a chainsaw as we weaved furiously through the idle traffic, the way only motorcycle taxis in Bangkok can. Traffic laws, which are arbitrary and mostly voluntary in Thailand anyway, seem to apply even less to motorcyclists…

Our exhilarating, roaring motorcycle ride was wildly fun. Its usual art. An oeuvre suicidal, brilliant, efficiently quick and kamikaze, filled with fits of starts and stops, skillful maneuvering, near collisions, frenetic speeds, and welcome whaps of face-cooling air…

(My buddy Crazy Carl said that Thai drivers, particularly the motorcyclists, motorcycle taxi drivers, most all believe in reincarnation. So they don’t fear death. Their thinking being that they’ll just come back anyway. Crazy Carl said some must look forward to death, because being a motorcycle taxi driver in Thailand probably sucks… He said the ones happy in this life are those carrying protective amulets… Always try to ride with a Thai motorcycle taxi driver who’s wearing an amulet, Crazy Carl preached…)

When we reached the hotel, which was on a side street in lower Sukhumvit, I noticed Bird was gone and that the motorcycle driver had no head.

I paid the headless motorcycle driver and, in the process, found my money had bloodstains on it.

The headless driver waied me and zoomed off into the humidity of the night, a gigantic plume of black smoke spitting from his exhaust pipe, almost as big as a mushroom cloud. The smoke was so thick and dark that the glittery neon skyline in the background appeared as if it were an impressionist oil painting.

The hotel was cold as a morgue. It was a dimly lit, teakwood cave, full of tiger-skin rugs, rainbow sashes and pink frilly drapes. The hallways looked to be an intricate complex of tunnels that didn't seem to end or start.

At the front desk, the hotel staff were foamy brown blobs. Floating about, they were dressed in traditional Thai attire of golden pantaloons, colorful sarongs, and pointy hats with tips like temple spires.

A short fellow checked me in. He had a heavy black garbage bag over his head, with slits cut out for the eyes and mouth. He was like the Thai version of the Zodiac Killer.

Zodiac's bony arms twitching, he spoke to me, telepathically, in a Tony Soprano-ish New Jersey voice, imploring: "Look, don't you never wrong a Thai woman. They'll cut your dick off while you're sleeping. My sister, she sliced off like four dicks. But she don't throw 'em in the duck pond, like youse always hear, yanno. Nah, she's saved 'em. Keeps 'em… Trophies in a glass case…"

I rode the complimentary hotel Segway through a maze of winding hallways, and the Segway braked, automatically, when I arrived at my suite. Right after I stepped off, the Segway zzzzzzZZZZZZZZZZzzzzz-zipped away on its own.

I slid my room card, hard, and the door beeped a Black Sabbath riff. Then I turned the L-shaped handle which caused the cherry red door to shatter into more than a million fragments resembling rose petals.

Inside, I found Bird already there.

The room was small, painted peach pink. It was practically a cabin in a gay cruise ship. And in its center, it had a jacuzzi without water instead of a bed. Inside the jacuzzi were stacks upon stacks of heart-shaped valentine pillows, and I kicked off my shoes and jumped into the jacuzzi, eased in next to Bird. A Muay-Thai kickboxing match was on the wall-mounted flatscreen TV.

Bird slung her arm around me, and I took a good long look at her unmasked face. She looked like a man. It occurred to me that she must be a ladyboy. How could I not have known?

Normally, they're not my thing. But it's been a while since I did anal sex. So I thought of giving it a go. Even in Bangkok it's hard to find a woman willing to do free, consensual anal sex, and if this one wouldn't do it, well…

The only ladyboy I'd been with was many years ago. I met her in the back of a bar, late at night, in Pattaya. I was stumbling drunk, and I can't remember how or why, but I know she gifted me thrilling, toe-curling head in a toilet stall. It was like an out-of-body experience.

But immediately after I jizzed in her mouth, she retched, crumpled, and hugged the crapper and hurled. And I was so freaked out by her vomiting that I yanked up my pants and ran away.

After that, I remember eating fried scorpions on the beach. Then I passed by a pack of violent ladyboys who were beating and robbing a middle-age German tourist on a side street. Then I vaguely recall passing out, sleeping rough, in the doorway, in front of (what I believed to be) my hotel because the front door was locked, and no one answered the doorbell.

That was my only ladyboy experience.

It was late. I was drunk. And I couldn't see that ladyboy's face too well in the dim lighting of the bar bathroom.

But this one, next to me, in this pile of red pillows, I could see. I inspected every inch of her face's symmetry. It was mannish. She had a real square jaw. She definitely looked far too much like a dude for my taste.

She cuddled up closer to me, eying me ravenously. She might have a female body, but it seemed as if she still had a male brain and a male sex drive. The way she was looking at me, it was like a starving man eying a piece of meat. I started to realize what life might be like for women, dudes glaring at them this way, every day, and I made a mental note to try to be less of a perv in public. Or at least wear sunglasses more.

We'd been locking eyes for a few sultry seconds, but I couldn't take it. She was too manly. I couldn't go through with it. I couldn't bring myself to try anything.

So I swung my gaze back to the TV. On it was now cockfighting.

Two torsos, with large erect penises, dueling and clanking them at one another. And then the scene shifted to another style of cockfighting, that of chickens.

This piqued her interest. Still staring intently at me, she said, in that nasal honk, singsong accent, "Papa, he have rooster. He go boxing, boxing rooster. He love rooster more he love me. More he love mama. Mama want kill rooster."

Hey, I could understand. I spent a few weeks on a road trip in Isan and myself had wanted to kill a few roosters. The feathered fucking things crying and wailing and cockle-doodle-doo-ing all night, outside.

I'd plotted horrific ways to kill the animals, too, dreaming of grabbing an AK-47, going John Rambo and cold smoking those RAH-RAH-RAH-RAA-ROOOOOO ass feathery motherfuckers. Or kidnapping the creatures and throwing them into a river with concrete shoes like a mob snitch. I was imagining all sorts of shit that'd throw PETA people into paroxysms.

In the end, I settled on earplugs and simultaneously cranking the loud AC and ceiling fan. Earplugs are essential equipment for living anywhere in Thailand, really…

Bird was getting antsy. She was clearly upset I'd not been returning her advances. I could see her, from the corner of my eye, frowning. And she upped the stakes by slipping down and off her black miniskirt.

She was wearing mesh, see-thru gray panties and through them I could spot a hairy cunt. She was post-op. Almost definitely no anal sex, I figured. Dammit, this night was the pits!

“Why you no love me?” she whispered, running a meaty hand, playfully along my arm. Her long purple nails sharp as talons.

And she scooted up closer, her soft, fragrant hair brushing delicately at the nape of my neck.

Then she pressed her big perky tits to my chest, grinding towards me, closer and closer, her flat little nose now nudging my cheek.

And closer, closer, she got, our bodies locked. She was practically wrapping herself over me like a blanket, her minty hot and humid prickly pulses of breath tickling at my ear, touching me in tingles.

Okay, I pondered, I can close my eyes, hit it doggystyle. This is some cyborg pussy, this post-op shit. I gotta try it. Only live once, right?

I sprouted wood, just thinking of how artificially tight the constructed cunt could be. How, with the right technology, it could be even better than anal.

Horny as a porn star, I shut my eyes, pressing them tightly closed, and my heart throbbed as I clenched my teeth and shifted my body facing directly opposite hers. I felt the warmth of her body heat, her big fake silicone tits pressed to the thunderous drum of my chest. But when I went in for a kiss, her hard tits and body heat melted into a void of cold conditioned air, and I fell face first and plopped into the pile of pillows.

Opening my eyes, I saw nothing but red.

She was gone. But where to? I rose to my feet, my eyes darting in all directions as I jumped out of the empty jacuzzi. Then I searched the whole tiny hotel suite. But found nothing.

Looking into the bathroom mirror, I saw that I was in a big banana yellow chicken suit.

One might think it'd be too toasty in a chicken suit, in the tropical heat of Thailand, but it was actually rather breathable and cozy. I supposed the material to be silk.

I hurried out of the suite, into the hotel hallway, and jogged along the twisting cave-like corridor, looking for my ladyboy. But she was nowhere. The halls, empty and quiet, felt like *The Shining*.

I trudged into the lobby. It was empty too. Frustrated, I went full retard and fucking trashed the place. Kicking over tables, tearing up paintings. Cursing at the top of my lungs, I picked up and flung a desktop computer, sending the monitor and mess of wires crashing through the hotel's front window.

Then, on the front desk, a tablet computer appeared, chirped, and vibrated…

"ZAAAAAAAAWAAAAAADEEEEEEEEEEEEZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZ…"

On the tablet's screen was a QR code next to a flashing photo of a torso in golden pantaloons.

But still no Bird.

No sign of her anywhere.

Stepping outside, into the muggy air, I bent forward, held my hands to my knees, and drew in a series of deep breaths. Next to me was a seven-foot-tall spouting penis fountain that was illuminated neon pink. And I paused to ponder a whir of white noise.

Then I saw out into the alley, where a hunchbacked old man, an unshaven, balding, fat farang, stood with his arms outstretched. He was in a green Singha singlet, and had on baggy mauve camo cargo shorts that were soiled, fucking dirty as a Wuhan wet market. On his feet were cowboy boots with spurs that appeared to be shooting fire, as if they were afterburners.

His head thrown back, the fat farang was staring intently at the smoggy starless sky, howling like a wolf.

He then lowered his gaze, spun around and tossed an empty beer bottle at me, and the glass bottle exploded as it shattered on the penis water statue, casting a bolt of white lightning, followed by a burst of pink smoke.

Once the pink smoke cleared, a neon orange orangutan stood in a mountain pose, in the near distance, staring at me, menacingly.

The orangutan, walking on its legs, like a man, had a malicious expression on its face and lurched forth.

I backed up, slowly, purposely, wondering what sort of defenses the hotel had against orangutans. And the beast only picked up its pace, and ran, full steam, in my direction, baring its fangs, its huge gaping mouth salivating, wet at the ready.

It was far too fast for me to outrun. And in mere milliseconds, it was feet away, chasing me recklessly through the streets of Bangkok.

The Orangutan and I were as motorcycles, roaring like jumbo jet engines, ripping through busy Sukhumvit sidewalks, bashing into pedestrians, knocking over street vendors. And as I attempted to hurdle over an elderly monk, I inadvertently karate kicked a street-side cooking cart, sending it flipping over, boiling water and red-hot cobs of corn shooting like shrapnel, maiming passersby.

A motorcade of motorcycle taxis, riding at Mach speeds, whizzed past us like missiles. And I jarred towards an intersection, but a tuk-tuk barreled forth, blocking my path.

So I stopped to face the wrath. And I spun around to punch my pursuer. Seeing the enraged orangutan, an arm's length from me, I did my best Floyd Mayweather, planted ten toes to the ground and launched a left jab at the beast's ugly mouth, which was big as a canyon and flying at me with the speed of a bat.

But as I threw that slicing jab, the orangutan shapeshifted, forming into a swarm of hornets, which disbursed, into the stink of Sukhumvit Road air, and there the hornets became mere directions of night.

From behind the remnants of the swarm stood Bird, jutting her square chin. Scowling, she clicked on her phone, causing an explosion, a bomb BADA BOOM pink fireball. Then I found we were back in the hotel room together. Supine, we lay like bodies on a heart-shaped bed.

Both of us in white hotel bathrobes, Bird lay panting. Her eyes leaping from her skull as she swiped vigorously at the Voodoo Doll app.

KILLING MR. POTATO HEAD

The evening's reception was a resounding success. There must have been over 100 people in attendance!

Smiling through sweet sips of champagne, Mr. Wu gazed proudly around the pristine reception hall. The place was nothing short of immaculate, with its teak walls, jade sculptures, marble-top tables, and crystal chandeliers...

Mr. Wu drew in a deep breath. Then he nodded in satisfaction, and his eyes twinkled as he soaked in the sights and smells of the feast, and his ears perked up at the clinking of wine glasses, hum of chatter, and choruses of laughter.

This was it. His years were coming to fruition. He'd bought a big house and a fancy car. He'd married a beautiful woman and had a beautiful baby. Yes. This was it. He was on his way to being a true tiger. He could see it now. The IPO, the private planes, Swiss bank accounts, luxury ski trips, interviews on TV. It was happening. By Buddha, it was happening!

Mr. Wu's daughter, Lin, eyed her father with disgust. Her eyes blazing as she sat rooted to her chair. Watching her father drink and be merry, it made her sick. Watching him brag about "his" business… Ugh, it boiled her blood.

Lin hated everything about her father, starting with his personality. She hated him as a person, first and foremost. But she also really hated his appearance. Particularly his head. The shape of his head, it was weird. It was like a big, boiled egg, like his face was just a drawing on a boiled egg. Oh, and the way his forehead slopes at too sharp an angle, like a ramp, as it curves to his scalp, to her, that was also highly unnerving.

Not only did he have a big stupid weird head, but she hated his short legs and arms too. With his short legs and arms and big bald head, her father reminded her, unflatteringly, of a Mr. Potato Head doll.

How could any woman be with a man like that, she'd pondered, in dismay… She'd suspected her mother had had an affair. That he wasn't her real father.

God, she really hoped he wasn't.

Mr. Wu's wife, Shan, sat by his side, like always, steeped in silence. While Mr. Wu bloviated, Shan incessantly checked her phone, tapped on her tablet, kept track of products, sales, and clients. Shan was a shrewd, serious, silent, and solemn woman. A woman with eyes like crystal balls. A woman with eyes that always appeared to be staring directly at you, like an Andy Warhol painting.

Shan was a woman of few words. But when she spoke, her words were elegant and refined, shot at measured clips.

And when she spoke, people listened.

Lin glowered at her father, thinking of ways to kill him. She'd most enjoy murdering him with a blunt object of some sort, she fantasized. To feel the flaying of his flesh… To feel his bones breaking as she beat him to death... His big stupid head bursting and squishing open like a watermelon…

God, she hated her father. She hated him more than anyone. It was a secret hate, though, one she'd never confessed. It was a secret hate that manifested itself in fits of silence, lack of eye contact, and, during college, a series of online "hookups" with older men, of varying ethnicities.

She'd read once that a woman's first relationship with a man is the father/daughter relationship, how that sets the tone for all future relationships with men.

The mere thought of that made her want to jump off a bridge.

As usual, they left before the drinking games began. Above them hung an inky-black, starless sky, featuring only a fuzzy outline of its low-hanging crescent moon, and Lin and Shan crossed through the parking lot, in lockstep, arm in arm, stepping swiftly in the heavy cold and its growing darkness.

Shan clutched Lin's arm tighter. Her opal eyes bulged. Then she peered around, panoramically, and swung her gaze, touched her lips to Lin's left ear, and whispered in wet hot pulses that perhaps the car had been bugged. That Lin's father had possibly planted a listening device in the vehicle's dashboard.

The pair swallowed their words, piled into the Porsche. Their ride home featuring a symphony of sighs, sign language, screenshots and knowing nods.

It was just past midnight when Mr. Wu stumbled home, stinking drunk. His unwelcome arrival like a sudden nosebleed. His arrival announced as he slammed the door, shaking the house's foundations. In a form of mimicry, a madman's cries cut the air, and he was acting the fool, kicking the couch, shouting incorrigibly.

Shan, her face twisted in broken sleep, padded forward, her arms crossed defensively over her chest.

In a red flowery bathrobe, she descended the winding staircase.

The noise hushed into gaping silence. But only for a minute or two. Then the screams began, grew louder, shriller. Shan's pained shrieks echoing, piercing the character of the night, rousting Lin out of bed.

Lin groggily stepped down the winding staircase. Then a frisson of fear passed over her like an electric current. Words were dead and meaningless as she laid weary eyes on her father, Mr. Potato Head… Mr. Potato Head all red-faced, in the atrium, gripping a brick-shaped butcher knife. Mr. Potato Head pinning her mother against the double door. Mr. Potato Head pressing the blade of the knife to her mother's throat.

Lin ran to the kitchen, grabbed the first blunt object she saw- a frying pan from off the stovetop- then dashed into the atrium, and cocked back the frying pan like a baseball bat and whapped her father upside his horrible big bald head.

Mr. Wu grunted, and the air left his lungs as he dropped the knife, the knife landing with a clink on the hardwood floor. Then Mr. Wu crouched and wallowed in pain, cupping his hands defensively over his skull, and he waddled sideways like a crab, in a lame attempt to escape the oncoming blows.

Lin continued to hammer at her father's big stupid head with the frying pan, hitting him again and again. The pan clanking as it beat at his skull, the metal reverberating in high-pitched jangles, like a blacksmith hitting hot iron.

Lin lost herself in the violence. It felt so good. Her serotonin surged. Bashing her father's big bald head was such a release, such a huge release that it was almost orgasmic.

It was the first time she'd ever fought back against her father. After everything he'd done. And there'd been a lot he'd done. There'd been countless slaps and shoves. There'd been countless threats. He'd beat her, her mother with impunity. He'd belittled them. He'd been such a tyrant.

But that was ending. Ending now. And Lin let a bloodcurdling, celebratory howl. And she swung the pan harder and harder, heaving it at her father's horribly ugly head, which was gushing blood and beginning to resemble a pepperoni pizza, the way his yellow skin was peeling back over his skull to reveal thick clumpy red patches.

Mr. Wu lay unconscious. Shan then tugged Lin away, hugged and comforted her. Lin dropped the blood-splattered pan, curled and cried into her mother's bosom.

Lin begged her mother to finish him off. It could be self-defense. They could finally break free of him.

Shan gently broke their embrace. Shook her head. Rubbed her red face and stared off into the unknown distance, wistfully.

Mr. Wu woke up late the next morning, in the anteroom, his head throbbing and pulsing, his skull feeling like someone was tap-dancing on it.

He pushed himself up from the floor, lurched into the kitchen. No one was there.

Then he moved slowly and lifelessly, like a zombie, making his way into the backyard, where he threaded through the freshly planted rose garden, and he purposely stomped on a few budding plants.

The garden led him to the bean-shaped, empty swimming pool, and he circled the swimming pool, the bright blue crater, a few times, unsure what he was looking for. Perhaps someone just to tell him what happened to his head, and why he'd awakened, on the floor, in a crown of blood.

BANGKOK BAIT AND SWITCH

Stepping cautiously over a chunk of uneven pavement, Chucky quickly shifted his weight, caught his balance. Then a wayward motorcyclist brushed by him, flying like a bat out of hell down the sidewalk.

Such is the pedestrian's struggle on the streets of Bangkok…

Turning on his heel, at the neon-lit entrance to Soi Cowboy, Chucky swung his gaze and spotted a smallish man lurking in the shadows. The man, who appeared of Khmer descent, stepped forth, and crept toward Chucky, like a cat stalking prey.

The man wore ratty flip flops, jorts and a puke green Chang beer tank top, and in his hand, he held a small black pipe that was packed with yellowy crystals. The

man's bulbous eyes darkened and bulged as he jutted the pipe forth, nodded for Chucky to take hold of it.

Chucky, though not an old Asia hand, knew well enough what this was. Cold shivers of fear spread over him, and he cringed and walked away as briskly as possible, avoiding that pipe like it was a live hand grenade. He knew the deal. He knew simple possession of even a small quantity of illegal drugs could land him in a tiny, stinky, fucking shit-hot jail cell, packed in like sardines with 50 or so other people.

Unless, of course, he paid something like a $10,000 bribe to the local police, the "boys in brown," who were probably watching from afar, having themselves set up the scam.

Though he'd gladly puff weed or whatever else might be offered, in the right circumstance, Chucky wasn't dumb enough to take drugs from a random, sketchy stranger. Especially not in a public place in a Southeast Asian country… This was one bitch ass bait and switch he'd definitely not be suckered into…

And not that Chucky needed much of an extra buzz anyway. The "pre-game" shots of rice whiskey he slammed before heading out were taking root, coursing through him. Just at the right time too.

Entering Soi Cowboy, the adult playground, he swiveled his gaze left and right, left and right, soaking in the sights, the assorted punters, brightly lit rows of girly bars, and best of all, the scores of scantily clad Asian skanks standing out in front of bars, waggling ass and tits, the demimondes calling out drink specials, lambasting any male passersby with cloying bursts of winking flattery.

Walking slowly, scanning the scene, most of the demimondes Chucky spotted were fuckable but none were worthy of posting about on Stickman, Teak Door, or even that fucktarded Thaivisa forum.

Okay, sure, like all of them he'd do for free, and one or two he'd pay a small sum for, if he were inebriated enough. But none of them warranted a second look. It wasn't until he laid eyes on HER, however, that he halted in his tracks.

"Sawadee KRAP!!!" boomed Chucky. His brows beaded with sweat, his gait off-step, a result of his creepingly severe intoxication.

The university-aged girl outside the bar smiled widely. She was all teeth and eyelashes. Her ears perked up as she sniffed in the pungent aroma of Chucky's alcoholism.

Chucky's head bobbed like a pigeon, and his lips curled into a goofy smile. His pupils dilated. Whoa! This had to be one of the hottest chicks he'd ever seen! No hyperbole either. No beer goggles, nothing like that. He was drunk but not that drunk. This girl was amazing! She was light-skinned, succulently slim, had legs up to her chin, and her curly, shoulder-length platinum dyed hair was glistening under the flashing glow of the bar's marquee.

Chucky thought about all the water buffalo he'd buy her. That is, of course, after he got behind her and banged the sloppy shit out of her sweet ass.

"Hello, han-sum man," the hot young girl cooed, "where you go? You come inside for drink, ka. Have happy hour, drink special." The way she accented the second syllable in special, speh-SHULL, ooh, it was plain adorable, got him all woozy, weak in the knees.

Then the hot young demimonde slid down from the stool she'd been perched on, tilted her pretty little head, and motioned Chucky to accompany her inside. Chucky instantly noticed how much shorter she appeared, once on her feet. She couldn't have been more than 5'0 or so but her legs still looked ravishing… Ah, TIT, this is Thailand, Amazing Thailand, he thought. How remarkable that such a petite girl could have those swimsuit model-like legs…

"Shall I compare thee to a summer day?" proclaimed Chucky in a faux posh British drawl. He enjoyed quoting Shakespeare to bar girls, if nothing else to amuse himself, seeing their puzzled reactions.

The hot young girl just smiled wider at him, reached for his hand and led him into the bar. Her tiny hand was warm, soft and smooth as silk. Following her inside, he lowered his gaze and gasped, his jaw hitting the floor at the sight of her tight little Asian ass all rippling and wiggling under the fabric of her miniskirt. Then in they went through the center part of a loose red velvet curtain hanging over the bar's front doorway, and the curtain swished at their shoulders as they entered.

The bar was freezer cold, dimly lit, and reeked of cheap booze, cheap perfume, and stale cigarette smoke, and was only sparsely populated. Only a few punters at opposite ends of the floor. The tired "sexpat" stereotype, of all go-go bar patrons being fat, old bald White guys was again being disproven. The bar's punters were actually diverse in age, appearance, and nationality. Like many Bangkok bars, it was a venerable UN of girl gawkers.

The music in the bar was loud. Body shaking loud. Even louder than most bars. Not good music either, like the classic rock Chucky dug. No AC/DC or Motley Crue. Nope, it was fast, repetitive, annoying Thai dance-pop. The same kind in almost every Bangkok go-go bar. The kind of music he wouldn't listen to for more than a

second. Unless, of course, it was accompanied by naked or half-naked tits, ass, and pussy.

Sinking into a leather seat, in a booth, Chucky glanced around at the bar's catalog and was distraught to see the demimondes, the go-go girls inside were nowhere near as hot as the chick outside, under the awning. The inside demimondes appeared older, fatter, and one was covered in faded bluish tattoos, even had a few face tattoos. Yuck, Chucky winced. The hag looked more like a prison inmate than a go-go dancer!

The only thing consoling him at this point was the smoking hot pussy sitting next to him. Now she, she was hotter than the summer in Isan, and, comparing her to the hags in the bar, her pussy's stock shot up exponentially.

So he wasted no time. Bought her a "lady drink," and they began chit-chatting. Her English was pretty good. Holding a frosty Singha beer by the stem, he sipped on his suds and swept his eyes over every beautiful inch of the scorching hot young demimonde's hourglass figure. Fun, friendly, easygoing, and with a smile seemingly plastered to her face, she laughed at his lame attempts at the Thai language, and touched his arm multiple times, sent him all the signals. Then it was time to close, and Chucky leaned in, cleared his throat, and asked her, in a firm voice, "Hey, how much for short time?"

"Cannot," was all she replied, giggling.

"Cannot?" Chucky quizzed, his head cocking back. His eyebrows then lifted so high they nearly flew off his forehead.

"Cannot do," she insisted. Her perpetually widening smile fading into a nervous, crooked little smirk.

"Why not?" Chucky asked. There were a few bar girls and dirty massage bitches who'd refused to boom boom him, since he had a somewhat large jimmy, at least compared to many of the local guys, the bitches' boyfriends, husbands, etc… Those sluts sucked him off, jerked him off, sure, but wouldn't let him run his snake in the grass. Wouldn't let him tap their tiny, tight Asian pussies…

"Too big?" Chucky shouted into her ear, the bass from the annoying Thai dance music was really rattling his body and seemed to grow louder and more menacing by the minute.

Then Chucky cupped his hand over hers, tugged her hand, and laid it flat over his hardening, purple-headed yogurt slinger, and rested her hand over the crotch of his cargo shorts. The girl lightly petted his semi-hard one-eyed weasel, then giggled, drew her hand away, fast, as if she'd touched a scorching hot surface.

"No, no too big," the girl chortled.

Now Chucky was offended. So it wasn't big? Were the other girls lying? Then he briefly pondered the old maxim of "How do you know a bar girl is lying? If she's talking." It probably rang true, he thought.

"Me no do," the young girl confirmed, "the boom boom," then she gyrated her hips, mimicking intercourse. Seeing the super sexy demimonde shake her hips, gesticulate like that only pissed Chucky off, and teased him, terribly.

"I just do drink," she went on, resting back into the booth.

Despite being tipsy, the revelation dawned upon him, hung over him like a heavy fog. He knew what this was.

It was a coyote.

A "coyote" was a girl who only talked to guys, drank with them, and then juiced the unfortunate guys' cash, without giving up any ass in return. The whole "coyote" thing, he'd read, was a fad imported from Japan, where lonely salarymen go to bars, after work, and pay women to simply sit and drink with them.

Upon first learning about coyotes, Chucky thought it was the most pathetic shit ever. Why would any guy pay a woman to simply drink and sit with him? With no chance of sex? What kind of sad, beta-male, bitch ass shit was that? And now it was befalling him. Now he was that beta, and a chilly feeling churned in his gut.

The only thing that didn't make him stand up, pay and leave ASAP, was that at least the coyote was letting him fondle her. He'd been rubbing on her slim, smooth thighs, reaching back and goosing her firm little snuggly ass, and squeezing her teeny tits. She'd even let him spider his hands up under her bikini top, pinch her cute, bottlecap-sized nips.

Sadly, though, she had swatted his naughty paw away when he'd tried to go down under, below the belt, and burrow down below her equator, tunnel into her black miniskirt, and conduct a little spontaneous, impromptu gynecological inspection…

As fun as it was to molest the young demimonde, he found it boring and lame that this was as far as it'd get. What the hell is wrong with these guys, going to coyotes, he silently seethed… Why would this even be a thing?

It pissed him off. The coyote could have had a warning sign or something. Chucky took his hands off the coyote, scanned around the bar, looking for a demimonde with a number. Swinging his gaze around, the euphoric rush of the alcohol kicked in further. But he remained cognizant enough.

He was worked up, molesting this sexy young piece of snatch and wanted to find a warm soft body, a nice juicy pussy to smash. He knew that if he could find a demimonde that had a number on her, he could ditch the dick-tease and rent a good Asian ass for a fun half-hour or so. That'd be more than enough time for a quick fucky sucky. Shit, usually two to five minutes were enough to get what he needed.

(This was one of Chucky's favorite things about demimondes, pay for play pussy. They didn't care if you came too quickly. Although sometimes he'd be disappointed if HE prematurely ejaculated. But only because it felt like a waste of cash.)

Swinging his gaze around the bar, he was further disappointed to see only a few demimondes on the dais had numbers. They looked miserable, too, were frowning and doing the "Bangkok Shuffle," the bored, half-ass bar girl dance, that was merely a series of weak jerks and turns.

Of the available demimondes he saw, one was snaggle-toothed, and another was fat, her stomach stretched out from baby damage. The other numbered pussy was the head-to-toe tattoo, prison inmate thing. Hard pass. He wouldn't even fuck any of those dogs for free, let alone pay.

Sensing Chucky's dismay, the coyote turned on the charm, asked him if he'd like another drink. The waitstaff, a gynecocracy, a chubby crew of middle-aged ladies

with made-up faces bleached disturbingly pale, far paler than the rest of their bodies, the fat bitches looking like something between sumo wrestlers and circus clowns, had also been pestering Chucky, every couple of minutes, cajoling him to buy drinks.

(One of the chunk-muffin servers even tried to flirt with him, get him to buy HER a drink. Yeah right!)

Turning icy with rage, Chucky just shook his face. Snarled. The coyote then picked up on his angst and told him "8" does boom boom. 8 was the prison inmate chick. No thanks, Chucky shook his face again.

He knew he'd lost in this bar. He'd been bit by a coyote, hit with the bar bitch bait and switch. This was apparently one of those asshole bars that hires a hot young piece of snatch to sit outside, lure punters in, and then gets them drunk enough that they'll fuck anything. Hence how flabby and tattoo face girl over there stay employed. Just despicable.

Chucky then smiled, remembered that face tattoo demimonde he'd hired, one rainy late night, as he was stumbling home drunk. She'd been sitting outside, at a bar, near his apartment. Despite the face tattoo, she looked pretty decent, had an otherwise pretty face, nice body, and big tits.

Once in his bedroom, she'd shocked him by slipping out a pair of fake teeth before giving him a "gummy," and it was one of the best blowjobs he half-remembered. But he couldn't recall much after that, if he'd banged her or not. If he did, it was probably doggystyle, he surmised, which was usually how he treated the occasional butterface he'd bang.

For a second, he wondered if the tattoo face demimonde on the dais was the same girl from that night. Could it be? He squinted and zoomed his gaze on her. Nah. The tattoo face in this bar had smaller tits, kinda saggy tits too, and a flat, bony ass. Definitely not the same demimonde. Fucking prison girl wasn't even doable…

Then he considered asking the coyote for head. There'd been a bar in Pattaya with a "naughty boy corner," where a punter could go, get his knob greased, off in a smoky, dark corner, for only $20 or $30. But then he remembered the coyote had braces. Big, silvery metal braces, and he wanted those nowhere near his dick.

Discouraged, he ignored the protestations of the coyote, who'd implored him not to leave. Chucky paid his tab, tipped the chunky clown face waitress 20 baht and made a beeline for the door, feeling dejected.

But as he left, his mood shifted. Re-entering the sticky hot air, seeing the pumping neon of the Bangkok night, he realized where he was. Bitch, he was in Bangkok! The city was full of bars, dirty massage parlors, and idling escorts.

His soul eased as he remembered that in Bangkok, as long as you got the cash, another mouth, another pussy, another ass always awaits…

IF I WERE A UYGHUR

*** From a Friend ***

CIRCA 2017

I'd been working in China for 5 years, at an international company.

On weekends, when time allowed, with coworkers or alone, I'd regularly make runs to a nearby shopping mall to buy food, mostly imported stuff. The sprawling mall, a Wanda Complex, had a massive, warehouse-like grocery store that featured an impressive array of imported products.

On a sunny Sunday afternoon, I'd gone to that mall, by myself, and purchased a block of cheese and some frozen foods. Being summer, the weather was muggy, hot as a furnace, and I was keen to catch a cab back to my apartment, stash my food in the fridge and freezer, cuddle up beside the a/c, and watch a good movie, read a good book before sleep.

Maneuvering through the store's chaotic checkout, I fended off the queue jumpers, paid, and gathered my bags. Then I rode the escalator up from the basement level.

Initially, I didn't notice anything amiss, but as I stepped foot onto the escalator's landing platform, I stopped mid-stride, gasping in shock when a uniformed, pot-bellied police officer, literally, jumped in front of me, blocking my path. The guy had leaped out of nowhere, like a fat tiger. The fat tiger cop was holding a smartphone, an iPhone, and was pointing the phone only a foot or so from my face. Wordlessly, he wrinkled his nose in disgust, began tapping the phone's screen, snapping multiple pictures of me.

A chill ran through me when I saw the fat tiger cop was flanked by 5 or 6 other officers. The coppers were all in uniform, and the police formed a defensive circle that ringed around me.

One of the policemen, appearing 30ish or so, stepped forward. He had a gaunt face, a weak chin, and a spring to his step. He spoke nearly perfect English, and his voice had an ugly, sharp edge to it, sounded almost like an ice scraper picking at a car window.

The gaunt face asked my nationality and requested to see my passport. I answered, handed over my passport, using both hands, in polite Chinese fashion.

He received my passport with only one hand and fished out a smartphone from his front right-hand pocket, snapped a picture of my passport's picture page. Then he patiently flipped through the document, snapped a picture of my residence permit. Afterward, he requested that I "wait a couple of minute (sic)." Then he sauntered off, dialing a number on his cellphone before lifting and pressing the device to his ear.

Locked inside the perimeter of policemen, all the coppers stood silent, still as statues. All the coppers were brooding, staring intently at me, and I could feel the heat of their blazing eyes. Knots of passersby began gawking, pointing at me, and I heard a lady say loudly, in a scurrilous tone, "laowai!" (foreigner). A sizable audience had soon formed, of local Chinese, of all ages, and they were all staring and pointing at me, watching me with widening eyes and mortified expressions, murmuring amongst themselves. Suddenly I'd found myself the unwelcome object of everyone's attention.

Honestly, it was humiliating. I felt like an animal in a zoo. I'd never stirred up trouble or picked any quarrels. I'd always kept to myself, never partook in any sort of prohibited political activity or religious activity. Honestly, too, I've always been somewhat apolitical, focused on work, business. It was hard for me, as a middle-aged, middle-management cog in an international conglomerate to imagine I'd ever really be in this situation.

My mind, of course, started racing. As the crowd of gawkers grew, I stood motionless, as if my legs had turned to stone pillars. I noticed too that my frozen food was beginning to thaw, beads of water dripping from the bottom of my plastic shopping bag, like incipient drops of a rainstorm. I wondered what the heck the coppers wanted. If maybe there was an incident in the South China Sea, or an attack on Taiwan. I wondered what China would do with its foreigners if an armed conflict, a hot war broke out in the Taiwan Straits…

I was a bundle of nerves. Then I imagined myself in a Chinese prison. I imagined myself in the film Red Corner. I imagined myself in a tiny, stinky, freakishly hot or bloodcurdlingly cold chamber of hell, with rats and cockroaches crawling over me, and the Chinese cops chaining me to a wall, prodding me with medieval torture devices. I recalled the Nazi dentist from the film Marathon Man, that film's

famous line, "IS IT SAFE?" And I envisioned a CCP torture session being far worse than anything the Nazis could do.

Unable to escape the feeling of impending doom, I reconnoitered, panned my gaze. Then I had a wishful fantasy about using my frozen food as a cudgel, beating one of the Chinese cops, smacking him in the face with a frozen steak and making a run for it.

But alas, even my fantasy felt feckless. I knew that, realistically, the chances of escape were slim to none. Not with the ever-present panopticon of surveillance cameras. Not that I'm Rambo, either, or even Jean-Claude Van Damme. Heck, I'm a slightly overweight office worker who's not been in a fistfight since middle school.

I could see the cops, security organ personnel, swarming, like hornets, descending upon me, blows raining down on me, batons and fists and kicks, and me with a bloodied face and broken bones… So, yeah, no thanks… I certainly wasn't making any video game moves… Life isn't a video game, after all. Life doesn't come with a reset button…

So I just stood pat. I felt pale as a corpse. I stared, morosely, hanging my head, watching the food in my shopping bag slowly dripping and melting.

A few more harrowing minutes later, the gaunt face returned. His thin, bony face was furrowed but his eyes were alert, though a certain light from his eyes had appeared extinguished, and he spoke with a faint smack of disappointment.

Gaunt Face told me everything is "in order." That I may leave. Then, again with a single hand, he passed me my passport.

I wasn't going to ask any questions about what had transpired. I just nodded, smiled politely, collected my passport, turned on my heel and briskly walked away. I was looking forward to getting my food into the fridge before it thawed completely. But most of all, I was damn happy to be out of there. Damn happy not to be hauled off to a Chinese prison.

It wasn't until a year later that the news surfaced, about the Uighurs being rounded up, across China, and herded into "re-education" and "vocational" centers. Being a person of Mediterranean descent, with a somewhat dark

complexion, I'd once or twice been asked, by local Chinese, if I was a "Xinjiang" person, a Uighur.

Then it dawned on me. The Uighurs I used to see around my neighborhood in China, they'd all disappeared, around that time, and those policemen from that muggy afternoon, outside the grocery store, they must have been from Communist China's version of the Stasi, and they were probably conducting a sweep, detaining Uighurs and transporting them back to Xinjiang, where they'd be placed into "vocational" centers.

Then another horrifying revelation dawned on me.

That is what would have happened to me if I were a Uighur.

STORIES FROM THE WEST

#SPOILER ALERT!

Rumors had been spreading like wildfire. "Manumission" was the talk of the town. It was to be a new art gallery, opening soon… Right on the same grounds that'd been the site of such horror…

The empty lot had stood vacant for 6 years. Despite the prime location, no one wanted to build there. After all, 98 people died, 124 injured, when an F4 tornado touched down, briefly, carving cruelty through that glass and steel-plated building, hollowing it out like a wrecking ball…

In addition to its infamous location, Manumission's structure itself was a big reason for the hullabaloo. A six-story high building, it was half a block wide,

shaped like a pyramid, and had thick, black-tinted windows that sparkled in the sunlight.

At night, the pyramid lit up, in riots of color, bursts of neon brighter than a Christmas tree, with "Manumission!" in bold red lettering, wildly circling the whole of the structure like a television news crawl gone haywire.

Everyone passing by the unusual structure gawked, was agog at its peculiar appearance. Pictures of the building soon went viral.

Soon after, "Anamnesis" leaflets were dropped via genital-shaped drones, plastered all over the city.

The leaflets featured collages of frames from the 1989 film *Weekend at Bernie's* interspersed with comic book-style drawings of Kanye West. The drawings depicting Kanye, in a wedding dress, scaling the Burj Khalifa skyscraper in Dubai.

Each leaflet was sunburst gold and had blood red, Times New Roman font on its front center, promoting the gallery's opening exhibit. The exhibit simply entitled: "ANAMNESIS: SPOILER ALERT"

The flyers were a bolt out of the blue and so striking and outlandish that they prompted scores of rumors, began long Craigslist and Reddit debates over just who was opening the gallery and exactly what "Manumission" and "Anamnesis" meant… Was it a publicity stunt? But for what? No one knew for sure… The proprietor behind the gallery was listed as "System Bandit Company" and had no website, no social media, and only a P.O. Box address listed in the Caymans.

On the Sunday afternoon "Manumission" opened, the air was soft and warm, and there was a long line curling around the block. The anticipation was palpable. A buzz was in the air, and the crowd's murmurs and thrums began to blend into a uniform hum, its din growing louder than a hundred televisions. The hubbub soon drowning out the hiss of the nearby highway…

Many in the gathering crowd appeared nonchalant, while others were at the ready, with croaks of laughter, feral grins, and faces aimed at and away from screens. Then there were others in the line who weren't even initially aware of what the hype was about. They just wanted to join the crowd. Those who

happened by, joined the line spontaneously, were those seeming to take the most photos, video.

The crowd was diverse but skewed young, 20s, 30s, and most appeared hip, or appeared aspiring to be hip, or were those simply too hip to ever actually be hip… Many wore colorful hats and vintage clothing… A big bear of a man, a hipster, with a pox-scarred face, walked slowly, in long strides, alongside the line, live-streaming the scene…

One heavily made-up young girl, with a great cloud of purple hair, was by the pyramid's entrance. The girl was pacing like a caged panther and was excitedly gesticulating and doing duckfaces as she snapped selfies of herself in front of the front of the line.

The air stirred, and the crowd suddenly hushed when a boom sounded from atop the dark pyramid: DUN DUN DUN… DUN DUN DUN… DUN DUN DAA DAA DAA DAAAAA! It cried out, sounding something between the 2001 theme and heavy metal guitars.

The colossal triangle's front doors slid open, split apart from the pyramid's bottom center, like the unveiling of stage curtains. Inside, the pyramid appeared pitch-black as the mouth of a cave. A faint mechanical buzz whirred from within.

Then came a cone of uneasy silence.

The curious crowd stood ensorcelled, unsure how to proceed. No one dared take the initiative to step in first.

A Black man, a rough sleeper, of about 60 years of age, ambled by, dragging his left foot. The man had a humpback, a weak chin, and his cheeks and forehead were scored by a series of deep crevasses, making his profile look like a wind-battered cliff. His worn army uniform was caked in dust and muck.

As the man limped along, he stopped in his tracks, then swiveled his wild-eyed gaze at the crowd, then at the opening in the pyramid's face.

In a gravelly, high-pitched voice, the man mumbled something about "dancing 'til my toenails fall off." Then his rheumy eyes bulged and twinkled and a playful smile broke over his chapped lips. Slowly, he limped toward the pyramid. His lame

left leg pulling and scraping over the sidewalk. The man mumbling incoherently, pulling his leg like a sack of potatoes as he disappeared deep into the darkness.

A couple of seconds later came a shrill, wolf-like howl. Cautiously, the assembled onlookers crept inside, one by one, holding their glowing camera-phones in front of them, like tiny square shields.

Several others who entered let out a similar cry, an ear-piercing scream.

But none came out.

The hipster bear's big blue eyes widened. His mouth curled downward. The blood drained from his face, and he turned pale as an early morning's mist. Carefully, he assayed the pyramid's ominous entrance. Then he drew in a protracted, deep breath and tiptoed inside, crinkling his nose as a bitter smell, like a medicine, greeted him, and a gust of ice-cold air slapped at his skin as he entered the antechamber's dark doorway.

The interior of the pyramid looked like a museum in between exhibits. Lots of open spaces and chrome, marble, mirrors, and shiny surfaces everywhere.

On the hipster bear's phone, which he carried on a selfie-stick, stark images emerged… Onlookers in disbelief… Mouths agape… Arms folded… Faces twisted in confusion… Some were kneeling, others weeping while watching sped-up, looped video…

Video footage of their own deaths.

The footage flickering as holograms, shooting up from the white marble floor like tunnels, water jets from a fountain.

Some were dying in car accidents, some were lying in hospital beds, one was aiming a handgun at his head… There were furious, grotesque figures, clawing at one another, in a spreading circle of red… A pot-bellied man in a grocery store, grimacing, clutching his chest… A woman in hair-curlers tripping over a cat and tumbling down a flight of stairs…

Above each hologram flashed pointillist, fiery red lettering:

#SPOILER ALERT! #SPOILER ALERT! #SPOILER ALERT!

GOLFING WITH MICHAEL JORDAN

“Don’t tell me your name. Don’t try to shake my hand.”

“Here are the rules: You do not speak to me unless you are spoken to.”

“You’re not getting an autograph. You’re not getting a picture with me… I know you’re expecting a tip, but you’re not getting one. The only thing you’re getting from this is that you have the privilege of being with me today. Is that understood? Yeah? Okay? Let’s go.”

Seeing him in person was surreal. I’d seen him millions of times on screens, TV, billboards. I’d worn his jersey and his shoes. And here Michael Jordan was, on a sunny, cool spring afternoon, standing in front of me. So close I could smell his cigar.

And not only was he talking down to me, but Michael Jordan had just refused to shake my hand.

It can’t be understated how freakishly tall NBA basketball players are compared to regular-sized humans. Michael Jordan, too, more than anyone I’d ever seen, just seemed impossibly tall. Like taller than the tallest skyscraper.

He had a certain glow to him too. I’d noticed that with celebrities that’d played our course. Bill Murray certainly had it. But Michael Jordan had it more than anyone. Perhaps it’s the “it” that people talk about. That hard to define, “star” quality, and there really was something surreal watching Michael Jordan, Air Jordan, stand in front of me in plaid shorts, a purple polo shirt and gray tweed flat hat. The Jumpman himself, chomping on a cigar while eying, unsheathing and inspecting golf clubs.

Being starstruck, it took a second to register his refusal of my handshake. And that he possessed a character quality different than indifference. His demeanor

was more one of disdain. It was evident in his lack of eye contact and the icy, antagonistic tone in which he spoke to me. And even more so with what he'd said.

The club had strict rules regarding workers around celebrities. If you asked for autographs, selfies, or fanned out on anyone famous, you'd be shown the door. Quickly and without severance pay. So it was odd he had given me these particular instructions. I'd driven for and carried clubs for other celebrities and found most cordial, if nothing else, and some quite garrulous, joking and roasting everyone, like Bill Murray.

But Mike was something else…

I was driving the golf cart and Mike was seated in the back. While smoking his cigar, I heard him speaking on the phone, talking what sounded like business, and his dialogue was full of curse words. This was prior to his *Last Dance* documentary, so I must admit that I was more accustomed to squeaky-clean Mike, McDonald's Mike. *Space Jam* Mike. I couldn't have envisioned Michael Jordan, in *Space Jam*, calling Bugs Bunny a "flaming faggot." So it was just weird hearing MJ cursing like a drunken sailor. I guess it can be quite revealing to see how celebrities interact with others. How they talk when they're not being coached by a publicist.

Going from hole to hole, Mike was playing like crap. He was shanking balls. Had balls plunging into the water. Balls in the rough. After each awful attempt, he'd erupt in more expletives, shouting creative combinations of four-letter words. If human beings had ratings, like movies, golfing Michael Jordan might have been rated NC-17.

This being his first time on our course and maybe not knowing its nooks and crannies, I could have provided a couple simple pointers, like I offered Bill Murray. But I was under strict instructions to keep my trap shut. And I did. And having heard about the way Mike made a bitch of the gangsta rapper Chamillionaire, in public, at an awards show, I was glad I kept silent...

I found it odd that Mike was golfing solo. He'd had a couple of big beefy security dudes with him, but they'd vanished before the first hole. Most celebrities have at least a few others with them, often a small army, but Mike was by himself.

Given his demeanor, status, he might not have many friends, aside from yes-men and hangers-on. It must be hard for Michael Jordan to make real friends, with his

wealth and so many people wanting to take advantage of him. Like a lot of the ultra-rich, famous, he can probably only be friends with other rich people. But still, it was strange, watching him spend the afternoon golfing alone.

It was even weirder hearing him fart. Michael Jordan, gearing up to smack a golf ball, and he just lets a loud, wet one rip…

After he'd completed the course, I drove him back to the clubhouse where he was received by his security detail, my boss, and a few smiling businessmen in expensive suits. As he left the cart, he didn't utter a word or even look at me. And he made good on his promise not to tip.

As he walked off, I wondered if he'd always been so inhospitable to his underlings. Or if his success, his outrageous fame and fortune had transformed him. After all, this is a person, especially with his freakish height, who can't walk anywhere in public without paparazzi, people pointing and pestering him for autographs and selfies. And what a target he must be for scammers and lawsuits. That must harden the soul to some extent.

In a sense, that level of celebrity is Faustian... His life not really his…

While I envied his wealth, the freedom that much money could create, I didn't envy his life, and I didn't want to be "like Mike."

It's sometimes said that people "shouldn't meet their idols," and I could have done without caddying for Michael Jordan.

But when the *Last Dance* documentary was released, and so many pundits were shocked to see Mike cursing, speaking candidly, him lashing out at others… I, myself, was not... Nope. I wasn't surprised at all.

THE RUSSIAN SNAKE CHARMER

Ivan was the clown of the construction crew.

Though he'd been in America for over two decades, he still spoke English with a heavy Russian accent, and his unique cadence and pronunciations were probably what made his jokes, and just about everything he said, that much funnier...

One of the older guys on the crew used to compare Ivan to the comedian Yakov Smirnoff, and one of the younger guys used to say Ivan sounded like Triumph the Insult Comic Dog. Another guy used to call him "Dracula."

But the Russian took the ribbing in stride. He never got angry or offended. If anything, any laugh he got would encourage him. The man genuinely seemed to take joy in amusing others.

Not only would Ivan crack jokes, usually dirty jokes, but he also had a strangely endearing tic of shouting out curse words. Often at random, like he had Tourette's. Hearing his Russian-accented cries of "motherfucker" (pronounced as "mutterfucka'') ringing out, daily, around construction sites, brought a smile to everyone's face…

It could be that Ivan was in a persistently happy and goofy mood due to his drinking. Like many Russians, the man enjoyed his vodka. Though he was never stumbling, slurring, vomiting, Charles Bukowski type drunk. Nah, he was more just tipsy, and always with a faint whiff of vodka on his breath.

That being said, the man was no slouch. Ivan was adept at pacing his drinking throughout the day and remaining functional and productive on the job. An important trait when it comes to construction work. In the mornings, he'd always clock in on time, and always kept his thermos of vodka at an arm's length distance.

According to his next-door neighbor, the Dominican, Jorge, Ivan would never hit the sauce too hard- until the evening - when he'd finish off whatever was left of that day's bottle of vodka. Jorge said that Ivan passed out, nightly, on the couch, while watching reruns of Married with Children.

(Allegedly Ivan learned to speak English by watching reruns of Married with Children, and in staccato bursts of broken English he'd quote Al Bundy, as well as Dostoyevsky, around construction sites.)

But despite his nightly boozing, Ivan never once showed up to work with any visible hangover, and he worked just as hard as anyone on the crew and was liked and respected by all.

His work ethic was what earned him his respect. But it was certainly his sense of humor that made him so well-liked. An inveterate joker, Ivan always had a smile stamped on his face. And the distinguished-looking, stout, spunky man just looked jolly, with his tomato red, permanently sunburned skin, and chubby cheeks that glowed like polished apples.

As for Ivan's background, not much was known. No one knew why or how he came to America. There were rumors that he'd been in the KGB, that he'd escaped from a Russian jail, that he was in a circus, that he was once a journeyman cage fighter, and that as a child Ivan wrestled bear cubs, like Khabib Nurmagomedov.

(Although Kentucky Karl said how everyone in Russia "fucking wrestles bears and shit.")

Jorge said Ivan had been married to a tall, obese woman, the lady about a head taller than Ivan, the woman the size of a refrigerator, and that one day she'd up and disappeared, and that Ivan never spoke of her. This, inevitably, prompted some to suspect Ivan had murdered her.

Jumpy Jim averred Ivan had probably poisoned her, because "that's how Russians usually kill people," but Black Ted said he bet Ivan strangled and buried "the bitch" somewhere out next to Jimmy Hoffa...

But really, almost nothing was clearly known of Ivan's past. The most he'd confided to anyone was what he said to Jorge, who'd jokingly asked why Ivan was so happy. Ivan, with a smile playing out over his lips, replied, in a sharp tone, that, "Nobody smile (sic) in Russia."

Ivan, though, he was smiling all the time. And yelling "mutterfucka" and pulling silly pranks, doing goofy voices. Normally no one could figure out what the voices were supposed to be, impressions or what, but they sounded so ridiculous, in his Russian accent, so pretty much whatever he said had everyone in stitches, kept

the minutes moving, the atmosphere light, kept everyone's spirits up. Especially on those hot, dog days of summer.

Ivan's humor, on every construction site, was beloved by all and was always a perfect panacea to the drudgery of manual labor.

The day of the snake started like any other summer day. It was hot as hell out. A steamy haze. The air heavy as a hot compress. Just walking around felt like swimming through lava. The heat index must have been about 125F. It was the type of thick hellish heat that makes one's sweat just stick to 'em like a plaster. Like the sweat has nowhere to go. Like even the sweat is sweating. Like every inch of your skin is slick and dripping as if it were covered in warm candle wax.

But by afternoon, after a quick thundershower, it'd cooled down some. And the guys were moving steel beams when a shrill scream exploded into the air, someone screaming bloody murder. Everyone dropped their equipment, slowly backed away. Jaws dropped. Then the guys formed a semicircle, and inside the circle was a two-foot snake. A dark green scaly serpent. A biblically evil creature, all cold-blooded and slithering and hissing, all menacingly flicking out its forked tongue…

No one really knew what to do. Except Ivan. Smiling, from ear to ear, as always, he sauntered right up to the snake. With a glitter of calm in his steely blue eyes, Ivan told everyone not to worry, because the snake "is no poison (sic)."

Then, just as casually as yanking the chain to a lawnmower, Ivan knelt to his haunches, and scooped the snake up into his right hand and rose to his feet, dangled the snake in the air, like a puppet on a string, and then he snorted and laughed, uproariously.

The construction crew gasped. Some excoriated him. Others begged him to unhand the reptile. But Ivan was unmoved. He just smiled, wide as a toothpaste ad, as sunshine flashed on his teeth. Then he declared that everyone should see him do this trick…

And with that, he threw his head back, yawned open his lips, pressed his eyes shut, and held the snake over his mouth, like a cherry on a stem. Then he lowered

the snake into his mouth, and the snake (which was eerily calm throughout) peacefully slid its head into Ivan's open throat and dipped down further, pushing in, like a dipstick into an oil pan.

There were oohs and ahs from the onlookers. One guy, a mulletheaded redneck type, retched and stomped off in dismay.

But then everyone silenced when Ivan started to convulse, almost like an epileptic.

Shaking, Ivan's eyes remained shut, and he dropped again to his knees, then wrenched the snake from out of his throat and released it. And with that, Ivan's face clouded over, and he collapsed, in a heap, falling to the ground, where he lay frozen as a block of ice, flat on his back.

(Though, somehow, the snake still remained calm. The serpent Zen as a monk as it slithered off into a hole in the ground nearby.)

Ivan, however, remained motionless on the ground. Then it appeared as if his chest was rapidly lifting and falling. Then it appeared as if he weren't breathing at all...

Curse words and panicked yells rang out. The semicircle inched closer, closed in around Ivan, though no one seemed sure what to do. One guy, who'd been filming the entire incident on his phone, kept his phone trained on Ivan and stepped forward, zoomed in on the Russian's frozen face.

Jorge, his frown deepening, his bushy black brows knitted in a puzzled tangle, grabbed a two-by-four, and paced cautiously, closer to Ivan, and poked, gently, at the Russian, searching for signs of life. Another one of the guys broke into tears.

But as soon as Jorge poked at Ivan a second time, the rubicund Russian's eyes burst wide open, big as boulders, and he sprung to his feet, howling and laughing hysterically.

His laughter drowning out a chorus of groans, Ivan then pointed at everyone and slapped at his knees in amusement.

Then, wheezing hard, almost as if he had emphysema, he tottered over to his thermos, twisted it open, and chuckled once more. Then he triumphantly yelled out "mutterfucka!" before gulping down a big swig of vodka.

MAN WITH A PONYTAIL

We were in a Grateful Dead, Lynyrd Skynyrd, Pearl Jam and basketball phase. We smoked weed, wore tie-dye shirts AND balled. And we balled hard, harboring hoop dreams, grandiose aspirations of being the next Big Bill Walton, Larry Bird, Chris Mullen, Luc Longley… or maybe Kurt Rambis…

We were trashy suburban teenagers. Honkeys with ponytails hooping. A couple of us had game, hops, too, and could slam dunk, turn heads on the playground. Mind you this was pre-Mac McClung. Pre-Steven Adams. Pre-Luka Doncic. This was the *White Men Can't Jump* Era… But we broke the mold… Blazed a new path…

And "blaze" we did. Daily. We'd even play high. We'd rip bong hits, then storm the court, dripping with sweat, playing 'til way past sundown... I don't know how we did this, in retrospect. Back in those days, cannabis wasn't as high quality so that could have played a role.

With all the legal weed, dispensaries, the net, it's weird reflecting on those pre-legalization, pre-web, pre-dark web days. How you had to know someone, have connections, in order to score.

If all our plugs, our normal connections were dry, we'd head down to the "hood" to buy weed. However, this entailed a risk of robbery. Or so we'd worry. And when we'd journey to the "other side of the tracks," we'd bring a knife, mace, stash a baseball bat in the backseat, or my friend would sneak one of his dad's handguns, conceal it in his '89 Ford Escort's glove compartment.

The worst rip-off I can remember, though, didn't come from a drug run to the hood. In fact, we never once got ripped off there. The dealers, "streetside pharmacists," dudes there were always cool, hooked us up properly with killer, crystally red-haired Jamaican buds… Nah, actually, it was a high school classmate of mine that gave it to us the worst. Another honkey.

This honkey was the sort often then referred to as, unfortunately, a “wigger,” but also known as a “yo.”

He was the type of White kid who spoke in Ebonics, wore baggy pants, oversize shirts, Reebok Pumps, Charlotte Hornets Starter jackets and stocking caps. He had a hi-top fade, eraserhead haircut like Kid from Kid ‘n Play and cut lines in his eyebrows like Vanilla Ice. He beatboxed, breakdanced, slap-drummed on lockers and freestyled in the hallways... He was our school’s Eminem, Andrew Schultz, or maybe a Michael Rapaport… Or he could have been the kid from that old Offspring music video, “Pretty Fly for a White Guy.”

The yo and I were in Shop class together, and he was strongly disliked by a couple of my friends. Because they hated any yo. One of my friends, a particularly violent and fat hippy had wanted to beat the shit out of the yo. Just because he claimed to hate “fuckin’ wiggers.” Even stranger, the yo backed down, in the hallway, when shoved and challenged to fight the fat hippy.

(This might have been the first and only time in the history of American high schools that a kid in a Starter jacket refused to fight a fat dude with a ponytail, in a Grateful Dead shirt, but I digress…)

Maybe my friend’s racially charged animosity wasn’t what it seemed. Perhaps it was a premonition. An omen to keep away from the yo...

Like lots of hip hop kids, the yo smoked weed. And I’d join him, sneaking off from Shop class to burn blunts by the football field. There, under the empty bleachers, we’d trade cassette tapes, mixtapes and bootlegs, listen to our Walkmans. And he introduced me to NWA, Cypress Hill, Das EFX, House of Pain and Funkdoobiest, a lot of which I liked, and I introduced him to Jimi Hendrix, Cream, Zep, and got him to breakdance to “Casey Jones,” which he claimed to dig.

The yo had high-quality cannabis. Kind buds… And while smoking, he told me his cousin, who went by the unique appellation “Teddy Bear,” was moving pounds of the same cannabis. Some sticky, skunky Vancouver BC shit. The chronic… At a price too good…

Four other friends and I pooled our cash to purchase two pounds. We were scheming to then sell the stuff as nickels and dime-bags. My friend who’d

invested the most had saved up for a while, had planned to peddle a pound of the stuff back at his boarding school.

I wasn't there when the "buy" was scheduled. But my friend back from boarding school and another hippy friend went to meet Teddy Bear. Details were murky, but Teddy Bear, also a yo, was with another yo and somehow the yo pair separated my friends, had them wait in different spots. Then the two yos vanished after receiving the cash. Leaving us dry and certainly not high.

My friend back from boarding school had put in the most cash and was angrier than anyone. It turned out his older brother had also put in cash. And his older brother was not at all a hippy. Actually, he was sorta scary. This was a dude who was like 25, had a shaved head and had been in prison. A dude who had lots of muscles, tattoos. A dude who worked at a motorcycle shop…

My friend's prison dude brother rode his Harley to my high school to confront the yo. Tight-lipped and angry-eyed, Prison Dude lay in wait for the clang of the three o'clock bell. Prison Dude pacing the school bus stop like a cagefighter during pre-fight introductions…

However, the yo pleaded ignorance, threw up his arms and claimed twice that he "din know noffin'." That wasn't a satisfactory explanation, and Prison Dude shifted his weight, clubbed the yo with a hard right hook to the jaw that sent the yo drunk walking, staggering and tumbling to the pavement. Prison Dude proceeded to start kicking the crouching yo in the ass. Flung a steel-toe boot right at the yo's red boxer-clad ass that'd been hanging like a target from his saggy Guess jeans. Prison Dude got in a good four or five kicks and a stomp or two before being chased off by school security guards.

The yo had literally gotten his ass kicked…

What was most intriguing was the outcome of the yo's beating. The yo's jaw had been broken, and he'd spent a lengthy time in convalescence. But when he returned from the hospital, the following school year, he was a changed man.

He'd become a hippy. Grew his hair long, was wearing tie-dye shirts, patchouli oil. He'd started playing guitar, too, and had gotten heavily into The Grateful Dead.

Even weirder was that the yo-cum-hippy had become violent, was regularly getting into fistfights. He eventually got expelled after savagely beating up, hospitalizing a scrawny freshman in a school bathroom. Fucking slammed the poor kid's face into a urinal after jacking his pager…

Some years later, I heard from a friend of a friend that the yo-cum-hippy had become a professional musician. And that he'd become embroiled in a legal battle after being accused of stealing another folk singer's identity. Allegedly he'd been performing the singer's music and was actively touring, playing shows in bars, clubs, and state fairs under that folk singer's name.

He'd allegedly stolen the folk singer's likeness, too, and was even pulling his chestnut-brown hair into the same scruffy style of ponytail.

I'VE BEEN SIGNING NIGERIAN SPAMMERS UP TO GAY PORN WEBSITES

CONGRATULATIONS! YOU HAVE JUST BEEN SELECTED TO RECEIVE $20 MILLION!

" … "

No, not really, but I'm sure we've all received nuisance emails like this. Normally from someone claiming to be a Nigerian prince.

Such spam emails have been rolling into my inbox, furiously, for weeks.

I've got no idea how my email address found its way to Nigeria, to these spammers, but clearly my email has been thrown to these modern-day grifters, and the spammers have been pouncing on my email address like it was raw meat thrown to caged lions in a zoo.

Every day, I receive several emails, usually from various purported royal family members. For some reason, the Nigerian royal family seems really excited and happy to bequeath tremendous sums of cash to a perfect stranger…

It looked so simple too. All I had to do was provide them with my full name, social security number, and bank account number, and WOW! $20 million, $10 million, $11.8 MILLION were ALL MINE!

Of course, as most of us must also know, this is a con, a swindle, a racket, a trick, a cheat, a flimflam, a hustle, a hoax, a bunco… a low-down dirty boondoggle!

These particular spam scams have been around for ages, too, and I once saw a fascinating documentary about this phenomenon.

Being that this racket is so well known, it's surprising that these emails still even exist. Sadly, though, some folks must still be falling for this, otherwise these emails would not still exist.

Since most of these emails originate from Nigeria, I got interested to learn a little more about the country, so I googled it, and then went down a Wikipedia wabbit hole.

In doing so, I was rather dismayed to learn that in Nigeria, homosexuality is considered a crime and that gays are often beaten, murdered, and even jailed, simply for being who they are… What the fuck?! In the 2020s? Really?

In fact, according to Wikipedia, 14 states in Nigeria have Sharia law and carry out the death penalty for same-sex relations, death by stoning, to be exact. In other regions of Nigeria, gays can receive prison terms of up to 14 years in jail!

Coming from a country where gay marriage is legal, and where a football coach was just forced to resign, largely because of idiotic anti-gay slurs he'd used in an email, I was definitely saddened to see how much worse life is for LGBTQ in other countries, especially in Nigeria, as well as other countries in the developing world.

Which brings me back to the spamming scammers that'd been attacking my email inbox on a daily basis.

In the documentary I watched, the scammers were all men.

(And I'm not sure why. Perhaps the women there have better, more effective scams to pull, or are just smarter and better humans than these spammers…)

After reading that the majority of the country is homophobic (up to 94-97% identifying as homophobic, according to a Pew poll) I figured, statistically, the

spammers would likely also share these beliefs, so I decided to avenge their email attacks by launching a little assault of my own.

My plan: I decided to fuck with the spam scammers by signing them up to gay porn websites.

I posited that doing so would both annoy the shit out of them as well as force them to confront their homophobia.

Every "419" spam email I receive now, I copy the return address, and then sign the spammer up to action-packed newsletters for sites like "HOT HORNY HUNKS SUCK COCK.CUM"

The recipients of such newsletter invitations will be the spammers, and I like to envision their reactions, as they log in to their email accounts, the anger playing out over their faces. Their eyes bulging. Their lips curling in disgust as they view the message awaiting them in their inbox. Oh, how I wish I could be like Facebook or Instagram and be able to flick on the spammers' webcams, watch their responses!

Obviously, the thought of the fraudsters possibly being, themselves, a closeted homosexual, that did cross my mind. But hey, if that's the case, then maybe they found a new gay website to enjoy, and good for them!

There's also, possibly, legal, social ramifications that could arise. What if the spammer, as he sat in a crummy net café, in Lagos, what if the person sitting next to the spammer saw his screen, saw him open an email with a picture of a dude sucking another dude's cock, or a big beefy jock, football-playing fuck, bending over, flashing his naked, muscly man ass for the camera, what if someone saw him looking at that?

Would the spammer be hauled off to jail? Beaten? Killed? I'm not sure, and I wouldn't wish physical harm upon the hoaxer. However, it's hard to feel too much empathy for those who swindle, steal money from others, steal identities. Such spammers are criminals who often exploit gullible seniors.

So, hey, if that scamster got his ass hauled to jail over, ironically enough, an email, then yo, I say that's just karma, bitch.

Not that I believe signing these con-artists up for gay porn will stop or deter them, but hopefully it at least annoys them, makes them confront their homophobia.

And, what's more, I do wish that one day, perhaps Nigeria can have a better, more equitable society. One that's not such a breeding ground for hate and spam scams.

BUM BASHING

Hank and Jimmy were the biggest bullies in our high school. They were the stereotypical "bad kids." They wore lots of black baggy clothes and had multiple facial piercings. Hank even had a tattoo of a Chinese character on his forearm before it was a fad.

(Of course nowadays, since he wasn't Asian, he might be accused of cultural appropriation, though it'd be hard to picture anyone saying that to his face.)

The two were inseparable, and if it weren't for the rumor about Hank raping a drunk girl, on a sofa, at a party, it might have been thought the two were lovers.

The two were always beating up on nerds, scrawny kids, foreigners. There was a pudgy little Indian kid named Kartique (pronounced "Karta-kay") and they'd kick the crap out of him, call him "Farta-kay" and steal his lunch money, damn near every day.

The worst I heard about them (well, maybe second to the raping) was that the two liked to go "bum bashing."

Bum bashing, I didn't even know what that was until my friend Tim filled me in.

"Bum bashing is when people go out, normally under the cover of night, and beat the shit out of bums, homeless," Tim told me, in the cafeteria, as he chomped on a corndog.

Tim had gone on to say that Hank and Jimmy would allegedly carry baseball bats, pipes, hammers, whatever blunt object they could get their hands on, and then

they'd set off in the night, find homeless sleeping rough in parks or in alleys and then savagely beat the ever-living shit out of the vagrants.

Tim and I then joked about dispensing a healthy helping of vigilante justice on the pair. Maybe slapping an electromagnet at Hank and Jimmy's faces, watching it vacuum off their facial piercings. Then we talked about flinging gasoline on them, as they stood behind the gym, smoking cigarettes, setting the fuckers on fire.

We fantasized about numerous horror movie scenarios, numerous gruesome ways to murder the two. Even though they never picked on us as much as other kids, still, Jimmy had punched me in the stomach once and stole my Chicago Bulls stocking cap and Harry had slammed Tim's head into a locker and stolen his Gameboy.

Yup, even though I already despised them, hearing about their penchant for "bum bashing" pissed me off to no end.

For real though, despite stinking worse than a bus station bathroom, the homeless in our city were mostly harmless. Most were elderly, with mental problems, many were Vietnam veterans. I always felt for those vets, too, since I'd had an uncle killed in 'Nam.

For real though, those veterans deserved better. Dammit, that was the last thing they deserved, getting beaten on by those two snickering shitheads. The more I thought about it, the more my blood boiled.

Soon after that cafeteria chat, I saw a story on the evening news about a homeless man, in his 70s, who'd been found, beaten to death, not far from our high school. I'd suspected the perpetrators to be Hank and Jimmy. But I didn't have any proof, aside from the rumor I'd heard. However, I'd considered calling the police.

As much as I hate snitching, murder, especially that of a senior citizen, now that's fucked up, and the more I pondered it, the sicker I felt, and I contemplated calling the cops and leaving an anonymous tip.

But I decided not to, after I heard the news.

It was a damp, chilly and foggy Monday morning, and I got to school late after missing the bus. My friend, Tim, who was my only friend, really, back then, had seen me in the hallway, between classes, and he ran up to me, giddy as can be. His breath smelled strongly of mint chewing gum.

“Hey, you hear about Hank and Jimmy?” he asked, his eyes bulging and blazing with excitement.

Shaking my head, “Nah, what about those asshats?” I asked.

“They were out wilding last night, slashing tires, breaking windows, beating up on bums. But, like, a younger homeless veteran spotted them wailing on an old guy in a cardboard box, and the veteran ran over, went fucking Chuck Norris on the pair, beat the both of them... bad… Beat ‘em bad, I mean, reeeeeeal bad. Hank’s neck is broken. Dude might never walk again... And Jimmy… Yo… Jimmy is dead…”

“Dead?”

“Dead. Got his skull caved in. And the veteran is in jail.”

I lacked the language to respond, I was so floored by the news. Jimmy was the first person my age I knew who’d died. Even though I despised him, still, his sudden, violent death hit me like a gut punch.

Hank showed up to school, a couple months later. But he wasn’t the same guy. He was emaciated. He had these heavy bags under his eyes, making him look almost like a raccoon. He kept quiet and was transferred to the “special needs” classes, where he sat with the mentally retarded kids. Later that summer, he was convicted of the murder of the old homeless man, and was charged as an adult, sentenced to a lengthy prison term.

The young veteran pled guilty to lesser charges and got off relatively lightly, with only a short prison sentence.

I’m not inclined, usually, to believe in karma, but sometimes, sometimes I wonder…

SOPHIE'S CHOICE

Over 20 times he'd called. More than 100 text messages he'd sent. His desperate tantrums had Sophie's phone buzzing, beeping like a cardiac patient.

Wouldn't he just go away?

She'd deleted him. But… he'd returned… A voice from her graveyard of ghosted guys… His every text message landing like kicks to the cunt… clawing… spectral hands thrusting up through the dirt…

And on this chilly fall night, he was here. Outside her apartment. In the slimy rain. Her jilted ex pacing the parking lot. His presence ghastly, cadaverous… menacing as a shark in the water…

In the gathering tempest her ex appeared ringed in a nimbus of rage. Then he froze in place, lifted his gaze, and lasered his eyes at her as she stood staring at him from between her front room's blinds. Then he thrust his phone into the air and started playing their favorite song: "Sweet but Psycho."

They'd both loved that song. They'd sung it in unison. Danced to it together. Before, the song seemed so sweet. But now, as she listened to its distant, tinny squeal, from the speakers of his smartphone, it wasn't cute. Or sweet. At all. It was frightening, sinister… To her, it sounded worse than nails scratching a blackboard… Sounded even worse than Ed Sheeran…

Mike the Mohawk Guy, he wasn't sweet, in any way.

He was a FUCKING PSYCHO!

Watching the stalker-y scene develop, Sophie pondered her options. Should she:

A) call the cops

B) go out there with a canister of mace and blast the mohawk fucker in the face

Part of her wanted to call the cops. Over 100 texts in three days must be against the law...

But part of her wanted vengeance. She'd tired of his philandering. She'd seen the girls' texts on his phone, and his friends, on social media, almost every one of them was female. Did he think she was stupid? That she wouldn't notice?

And why was he so surprised when she'd given him the boot?

He had perfect facial structure and a hard body that'd make Michelangelo proud. He could so easily find another girl.

But instead of moving on, he'd begged her to "give it another chance." He'd actually cried too. A grown man. A grown man, a grown man with a beard, crying like a baby. A 35-year-old, bearded man sniveling and high-pitched whining on the phone, his voice cracking.

To her, a grown man crying, unless extenuating circumstances were at play, might be the cringiest thing ever… God, that might be even worse than loudly farting in front of your lover…

Like, just when she heard that first crack of his voice, that squeaky "urmph" when he started to cry, just… ugh...

She thought he sounded like such a bitch...

Facts: they'd only been together for three months. Three months. She wasn't that emotionally invested. And she'd even cringed when he'd said, "I love you."

Three months in and he "loved" her? This guy with a mohawk? This guy who'd wear skinny jeans, rumpled hockey jerseys and corny T-shirts saying things like, "I'm FBI: Female Body Inspector." Or: "I'm not gay, but $20 is $20."

None of it made sense. She found him something of an enigma too. Although he always had money, he was ambiguous about his work. He'd prevaricate. Never really say what he did. He'd mentioned "crypto" and an online business, but when

she'd asked for a link to his business's site, he told her the site was "under construction" and most of his work was "conducted through email."

Email? Who the fuck still emails? People still using AOL and 56K dial-up modems? No one sends emails these days, except spammers and "princes" in Nigeria.

Hmm… Maybe that was it. He could be a sketchy, dirty scammer, swindling lonely elderly out of their retirement cash. Ugh, she quivered in revulsion. Or maybe he was a drug dealer. What if he sold fentanyl? Oh, that'd be so creepy… If, like, it was him who killed Prince…

Whoever and whatever he was, his mohawk head stayed circling the parking lot... Like a bloodthirsty shark…

Fortunately, though, he'd lowered the phone. Quit the retro, 1980s movie antics. But he lingered, lowered his phone to his side, like a gun to the holster. Her heart then skipped a beat when he contorted his pale, puffy face and she saw him pull open the passenger door to his black Honda Civic, reach inside the car.

Sophie stepped back from behind the blinds, breathing heavily, terror raising goosebumps along her arms, cold fear creeping through her joints and bones. Then she started praying he wouldn't break out a machine gun, go Columbine.

Inching back, she prepared to run and dive into the bathroom. Jump in the bathtub as if a tornado were coming. But then she sighed in relief, her shoulders slumping as he produced a big, gaudy bouquet. Then he jerked the red roses into the sky. Then he put on a pathetic smile and dropped down to one knee.

Like, oh my God... Just… What the actual fuck?

Sophie thought that this might be the Colin Kaepernick of stalking.

Sophie just wanted to be done. Done with him. She quickly shuffled away from the window, scooped up her phone from the kitchenette counter and stabbed a finger at the phone's side.

She pictured her fingers as knives. Her hand like Freddy Krueger's. Her fingers slashing Mohawk Guy's throat. Sticky blasts of his warm blood splashing over her,

like hot water from a showerhead. Her beaming, radiant as a smiley happy version of Carrie.

But the device didn't bleed. It just died a silent death. Went blank. And hanging her head down at its empty screen, Sophie wished she could do the same thing to Mohawk Mike. Just press a button and have him go away.

Sophie's roommate sat motionless in the living room. The girl with the pink teddy bear ear buns, rooted to their U-shaped sofa. The girl glued, as always, to her phone's phosphorescent force. Throughout the entire ordeal her roommate hadn't lifted her gaze or said a word. Probably didn't even notice. She and Sophie mostly communicated by text messages.

For a second, Sophie contemplated plopping down next to her roommate, on the sofa, ranting about Mohawk Guy. But seeing the discomfiting inelasticity of her roommate's face, her unblinking gaze, the raccoon circles under her roommate's eyes, Sophie decided she'd rather rant online instead.

Sophie harrumphed, scoffed and shook her head full of purple hair. Then she stomped into her room and tried to slam her door shut. But her bedroom door was so flimsy that it didn't really slam, and flinging it to its hinges, as she did, felt thoroughly unsatisfying.

Then she looked around her room. Her meager room. Sure, it was stuffed with stuff. Amazon packages. A flat-screen TV. A tablet. A closet jampacked with clothes and shoes. For such a humble room, it sure had a wealth of possessions.

Then she thought that this… This is where, what, and who she was. This was her "lot in life."

This was her: she was 30. Single. Doing gig work. Living with a zombie roommate. In piles of debt. In and out of hookups or having a series of dysfunctional, short-lived relationships. Would it always be like this? She had no five-year plan.

Maybe, she pondered, her mind racing… Maybe… Maybe the mohawk guy wasn't a freak. Maybe he wasn't a stalker. Maybe she overreacted. Guys have friends

who are girls, right? And those girls everywhere on his phone could be relatives, coworkers, or business partners. She didn't know. She didn't even ask. She'd just made assumptions.

She'd always made assumptions. She'd always catastrophized…

Her once trendy teenage angst had hardened into a type of terminal blues; the doldrums starting in high school, soon after her parents' divorce.

Her distrust of men started after her father's affair and was solidified by her dad's absence. Aside from his occasional, obligatory visits.

She hated those visits too. Her father's awkward fits and starts of small talk. His trying to be "cool," using outdated teenager slang, declaring everything to be the "bomb."

She hated her father's beer breath and sweaty brows and the width of his shoulders as he stood next to the swing set in the backyard. The way he'd speak without moving his lips; his greasy skin, distracted gaze and his bloodshot eyes and the heavy black eyebags on his tired face; his lizard-quick facial expressions and his clammy hands…

Her father's oily voice wet in her ears… His constricting suits and neckties… Her father's face wrinkling with rage. His neck veins popping like exposed pipes as he'd stop mid-sentence to yell into the Bluetooth earpiece stuck in his ear, the device limp, black and heavy as a dead beetle…

Then came her mother's catatonic alcoholism. Her mother always passed out or about to pass out on the pleather sofa. Her mother in various sleep poses. Her mother softly snoring. Her mother's mouth agape, short pink tongue stuck to the curve of her lower lip, like a pitiful dog.

Her mother's vacant stare, facing half-eaten TV dinners and rows of empty wine bottles… The whiff of puke on her mother's breath… The TV always loud and always on… The TV tuned to sitcoms from the 80s. Full House. Growing Pains. Those teleplays colored by laff-tracks, smiley hair crimes and neon clothes…

Then another surge of cold fear broke over her at the realization, the potentiality-of winding up like her mother… A lump on the couch. A big puke-breathed snoring clump of covers in front of a blaring television. A zombie… Dead but not dead. That seemed a fate worse than any other. And Sophie decided that no, no, noooooooooo! NO!!!!! She didn't want that!

And she didn't have to be that. She could act now. She could break the cycle. She could give the mohawk guy another chance.

In fact, she would.

She would do that. She'd ask him the questions she should have asked. She'd open up to him and stop being such a snowflake.

Maybe… It was her fault all along. Maybe everything she'd adduced was incorrect…

Maybe she was the asshole in all this. Maybe she shouldn't have looked down on him for crying on the phone. Maybe he was just sensitive. Like Drake. She loved Drake. A man sensitive but still strong. The more she thought about it, she could see Drake crying on the phone. Drake expressing his feelings, showing his vulnerabilities. Maybe the mohawk guy was like that. Maybe he was just sensitive, and maybe that's okay.

Maybe… Maybe he was her soulmate. Maybe they'd have kids, a happy life, a nice house… She started to picture their names, "Mike and Sophie," written in cursive…

Maybe… Maybe she could make him shave off that mohawk, that dead animal stuck to his head thing... Maybe she could make him wear better clothes… Maybe… Maybe he really was an entrepreneur and was cooking up a revolutionary app or website or online business that'd take the world by storm!

Maybe, one day, one day he'd be a famous billionaire… Maybe he'd be the next Elon Musk. Billionaires are weird and sensitive, too, right?

So, she crinkled her nose, swallowed her pride, drew in a deep yoga-like breath. Then she powered up her phone, with purpose…

When she rushed out of her room, she saw her teddy bear-hair roommate still transfixed, staring at the little blue square of light in her hands as if she was trying to remember something, and so Sophie didn't stop or say a word as she opened the front door to a wall of cool, wet evening air.

Wearing only an electric blue bathrobe and Hello Kitty socks, she realized that this could be the first time since she was 12 that she'd leave the house without make-up. And she couldn't care any less…

As if fired from a cannon, Sophie shot into the hallway, ran down three flights of stairs, two steps at a time, running frantically into the slimy rain, right into the parking lot.

Panting and wheezing, she was ready. She was ready for him. Her soulmate. She was ready to kiss and hug and to talk about the future. Their future.

But… He wasn't anywhere. His car was gone. And when she called him, he didn't answer. Nor did he reply to any of the ensuing 100 text messages.

AFTER SCHOOL

Inspired by a scene from Welcome to the Dollhouse…

Theresa walked with a limp, her impaired gait stemming from a childhood injury. While riding her bike, she'd been sideswiped by a delivery van, thrown into a muddy swale. Although she was lucky to be alive, her right leg suffered permanent damage and disfigurement.

Following the incident, she'd spent a lengthy convalescence in the hospital, and that was when and where she'd discovered a passion for reading.

Books showed her new worlds and offered an escape from her mundane life in middle America. Aside from occasional car accidents, there wasn't too much happening in her idyllic little lakeside bedroom community, and while reading, sometimes her mind would drift to thoughts of traveling, visiting faraway, exotic places, or even just moving to a big city, like NYC or LA, somewhere sophisticated and cosmopolitan.

In school, Theresa rarely socialized outside of study groups. Rather, she preferred to sit quietly, reading, between classes and during lunch. On the bus, too, she'd be reading, her head always bowed to a book. Basically, she was never without a book in her hands. Books, to her, were ideal friends, in that they always had useful, amusing things to say, and they were always there when she needed them. Not to mention books never stared at her, or squinted, pointed or asked her, often sardonically, "Hey, like, what's wrong with your leg?"

Her world had been quiet, one of books and study. Until he came along…

She'd figured he'd just transferred in from another school because she'd never seen him before, though his long, sharp face was vaguely familiar.

The new boy was tall, skinny as a scarecrow. And he looked like a misfit, a stereotypical juvenile delinquent. He wore backward baseball caps, T-shirts with pictures of serial killers, and he had an oversized steel wallet chain dangling from his baggy pants, and as he walked through the halls, the chain made a jingly sound, like keys rattling.

Strangely, he was the first boy to ever pay attention to her. Normally nobody paid attention to her. The first time she saw him in the hallway, their eyes met, and she'd quickly averted his gaze, turned her cheek.

But his gaze was unwavering. His brown eyes growing as he stared her down. To her, it felt almost as if he were a lion in the Serengeti and she was an antelope, a wounded antelope too, with how she limped. His eyes were unyielding, affixed, and blazing with a scary, animalistic glint. His eyes like an angry dog's. His stare sending a chill down her spine. There was such an ugliness, too, in how he trained his glare. It was penetrating. Unnerving.

That first time he saw her, he made no attempt to speak with her. He just stood, leaning against his locker, brooding and glaring at her; his upper lip curled; his arms folded over his chest. Veering further to the opposite side of the hallway, she felt the cold weight of his gaze, like it was a block of ice pressed to her neck, and she wished she knew magic or something and could make herself invisible so she could just disappear.

But, unfortunately, she couldn't make herself invisible, despite attempting a few spells from a fantasy novel she'd read. And his staring continued. His angry dog glaring growing seemingly more hostile by the day. And it'd started to feel, to her, as if he were everywhere in the school, like he was stalking her, lying in wait, ready to pounce. As if his brazen face were behind every door, his obtrusive eyes under every desk.

Even in the girls bathroom, she could sense the sting of his presence. As if he were there, staring down at her, watching her piss and shit.

Like her, he was also a loner, never sitting or talking with anyone. He'd sit alone at a nearby table in the cafeteria, during lunch, just glaring at her. He'd glare at her every day in the cafeteria, then in the hallways too. After school, as well, at the bus stop, among the knots of students, he'd be standing by his lonesome, his arms folded, his eyes just like the laser scope of a rifle, his eyes steadily locked in on her… burning…

She didn't quite know what to do about it. She'd always minded her business, avoided conflict. No one had ever tested her like this. Since she was enrolled in

only honors classes, she didn't mix with kids like him, and the kids like him normally bullied others, normally boys. To her, it was uncomfortable, unchartered territory.

Being an only child, she didn't have a sister or brother to confide in, ask for help. She eventually mentioned it to her busybody mother, over an early evening pizza dinner, but her mother brushed it off, giggled and said that he "probably just had a crush on her." Her mom encouraged her to be brave, strike up a conversation with the new boy. Maybe they could "study together." Her mother was constantly suggesting she find more friends to "study" with.

So she took her mother's advice, overcame her frissons of fears, her pusillanimous inclinations. That next morning, she worked up the courage and went over, between classes, to talk to him. Meekly, with minimal eye contact, she politely introduced herself to him. His answer, though, shocked her.

"I'm gonna rape you," he told her, in a condescending voice, his thin lips curling into a sinister grin.

Taken aback, all she could mutter was "what?" and her brows knitted as a fit of nausea plaited over her, her panic collecting and hardening, as if a chunk of concrete were forming in her stomach.

"That's right. I'm gonna fucking rape you. After school. Today. You're getting raped."

Then he sneered at her, turned his cheek, and calmly walked off, the chain on his baggy jeans jangling.

Paralyzed with fear, she paused among the clumps of students crisscrossing by her in the hallway, feeling like a car that'd broken down in the middle of a busy highway. Then her mind started spinning in circles. She was young, sure, but she knew what "rape" was, she knew what he meant.

But she'd long figured any rapist would be a weirdo in an old beat-up van, or a shifty-eyed freak in a trench coat, some perv lurking near the playground. She never expected the backward hat guy of… that… She pictured him beating her up, robbing her, maybe growing fangs and biting her like a vampire, or even killing her, hacking apart her body with a chainsaw, but not… this…

It's not as if she'd had much experience with boys. Actually, she possessed none. She'd never done anything with a boy. She'd never had a boyfriend. But she knew what sex was, and rape was a sort of nonconsensual sexual intercourse, she knew.

For years, she'd been reading sex scenes in books, so she was aware of sex, as a concept, as an activity, that, usually, adults and older teens did. But it was in that Sex Ed class, just recently, that she first saw graphic illustrated pictures, drawings of penises and people… doing… that… and it'd totally grossed her out. Sex, to her, seemed so revolting. Like, why would people want to do that? Because it felt good? It only looked dirty and disgusting to her.

Especially penises. A penis, yuck, what a disgusting thing! A penis, to her, looked like a hideous reptile, a creepy crawler creature that was a cross between a snake and a turtle. Just the thought of that gross, hairy, slimy thing hanging from a boy's body, that gross snake thing, ick, slithering… inside her… it made her shudder and feel nauseous. And this was what the delinquent wanted to do? Shove his disgusting reptile thing in between her legs? Ick!

(After first seeing a picture of a penis in the Sex Ed class, Theresa had trouble understanding how boys were even able to walk, with that snake thing hanging and dangling, between their legs. At first, she thought that there must be a shell or something it could crawl into, right? Maybe that's what the testicle sack was for; surely, penises didn't just flop around, down there? She wanted to ask the teacher about this but wasn't able to muster the nerve to raise her hand.)

(Then it dawned on her that if all men have penises, then her dad, her grandfather, her science teacher, they too have… YUCK! And if they all have those creepy snake things, did even her 90 y/o great-grandfather have one? Does he still have one? Or do old penises wither, fall off with time, like a dead tree branch? She hoped for her great-grandpa's sake that penises did wither and break off,

because they were so yucky, and she didn't like to think of him having one of those things…)

After thawing from the shock of the encounter, Theresa limped briskly to the library, sat down to a study table and ruminated on the delinquent's proclamation, how he might follow through on his rape threat. Would he run up behind her? Drag her off somewhere? Certainly he wouldn't do it in public, in front of the school, or at the bus stop… Or would he?

How would she fight him off? How could she? She knew she couldn't outrun him, not with her lame leg. She also didn't have a weapon, nor did she know how to fight. Then she thought about telling one of her teachers, but maybe they'd say the same thing as her mom, that the new boy had a crush on her or something and that she should be his friend. It was all so embarrassing too. And would the teachers even believe her?

After school, she padded out to the bus, walking on eggshells and trembling, gritting her teeth as she was expecting the worst. But her tormentor was nowhere to be seen. She kept looking over her shoulder, thinking he'd be behind her, about to attack, but he was nowhere.

That evening, though, she kept seeing him, kept seeing his sharp, angry face, his fiery eyes. She couldn't concentrate, could barely read. She'd imagined him in shadows, him standing in dimly lit corners; the delinquent scowling, frowning, his arms crossed, his telescopic gaze trained…

Then at night she had trouble sleeping, thinking he might climb in through her window, jerk down his pants and attack her with his horrible snake thing, so she'd kept her covers tucked tightly over her head and left on a nightlight.

When she saw him the next day, her heart started drumming, and a lump of panic balled up in her throat. Her eyes widening in alarm.

He seemed paler than before, his skin chalk white. But his eyes appeared darker, as if his pupils were clumps of coal. As he walked by her, in the hallway, she smelled a strong whiff of cigarette smoke, and once he noticed her, his eyes popped, and he stopped mid-stride, his clanky chain hushing silent. Then he stalked toward her, bent forward, and whispered in her ear, his breath blowing cold as the winter wind. Speaking in a churlish tone, he stated that today, for sure, he would rape her after school.

Once more, she was petrified. All that day her mind raced, ruminating on a plethora of gruesome outcomes. And again, after the final bell rang, she lumbered out to the bus stop, gloomily, sternly, with compressed lips. But again, he was nowhere to be seen, and she went unharmed.

Back home, she sat bolt upright in bed, gnawing at her dilemma; her thoughts whirling, her fears churning. Then she glanced over at her bookshelf and saw the spine of the book, *Carrie*. She thought of Carrie, the character from the eponymous Stephen King novel, and she drew strength from the anti-heroine, thinking how badass Carrie was for taking revenge, finally standing up for herself.

Though Theresa didn't possess any magical powers, like most people, she could at least get her hands on a weapon. And she would. And then suddenly a soothing, warming rush of tranquility becalmed Theresa as she decided then and there that she WOULD NOT be a victim.

The next morning, she woke up early and stole a knife from the kitchen counter. It was razor-sharp, a German, 13 cm serrated utility knife, stainless steel, with an ice-hardened blade. It also had a sheath, which made it easy to carry and conceal in the front pocket of a pair of loose sweatpants.

Theresa knew enough about human anatomy to know the best spots of the body to attack and slice open, including the major arteries. If the delinquent ever really tried to shove his ugly turtle snake thing into her, she was going to whip out the knife and stab him in as many places as she could.

Thinking about it more, on the bus to school, her rage festered. Gazing out the window, passing by the murky greenish waters of the lake, the angrier she became, and she even considered preemptively attacking him, just strolling up to him in the hallway and slashing him, maybe cutting his disgusting turtle snake penis thing right off!

How dare he! How dare he terrorize her, threaten her! All for what, too?! She'd done nothing but try to be his friend. Hatred began to boil over inside her. She'd never detested anyone as much as that sharp-faced, creepy, backward hat-wearing shitweasel. She really, really wanted to stab him. If not in his horrible penis, maybe in his eyes, fucking stab and gouge out both of his eyes so he couldn't stare at her anymore. The fucker!

But she couldn't bring herself to do it, to act preemptively. She remained on the defensive. And the same pattern repeated itself. Every day, for the following couple of weeks, he'd pass by her in the hall, reeking of cigarettes, and he'd whisper evil, threaten to rape her, and then every day, he'd disappear by the final bell. And he never touched her.

Each time he taunted her, she dug deeper into her front right-hand pocket, gripped tighter over the blade's cool, ergonomic handle. And each time he taunted her, she came closer to whipping out the weapon, jabbing it into his stomach, right around his belly button, and she'd relished the squishy sound she imagined the blade making as it broke through the layers of his skin.

Then she'd smile devilishly inside, imagining twisting the knife around, slicing through the hot, soft gloopy mass of his intestines, his insides slippery as soap, his warm blood splashing at her as it spurted from his guts, his blood-spattered bowels spilling from his stomach like a sack of dead snakes.

She'd smile inside, too, picturing herself painted in blood, standing over her tormentor. The fucker in a pool of dark blood, flopping like a fish out of water…

But then the threats suddenly ceased when he stopped showing up regularly to school. And on the few days he'd come, he'd turn up looking rough, ghost-like

and corpse-colored, with red whelps on his face and big purple, blue and black bruises dotting his limbs. His cussedness seemed to have vanished along with his color, too, and he wouldn't say a word to her, or even look at her. He'd simply walk down the hallway, vacantly staring at the ground, his chain jangling.

A month or so later he'd shown up to school with his arm in a heavy cast and sling. Then he stopped showing up to school, at all.

Another month later she was online, researching a paper for her sociology class, a paper about school violence. While flicking through an archive of newspaper articles, she saw a story, from 7 years ago, about a young inmate who'd been killed in the state prison.

Clicking on the link, she saw a familiar face. It was him. Beyond any doubt it was him. Her tormentor.

Hairs prickled on the back of her neck and goosebumps raised on her arms as she read on. The article stated that Tanner Roche, then 15, had been convicted of a school shooting, at her school, over 10 years ago. He'd opened fire in the cafeteria and killed four kids before finally being subdued by fellow students and staff. Following his arrest, he was charged as an adult and sentenced to 110 years imprisonment.

Three years later, after being transferred to an adult facility, he was discovered in his cell, naked, with his throat slashed.

LET LIONS RUN LOOSE IN THE CITY STREETS

“It’s a slow burn.”

Steady raindrops, fat, and red as blood, flowed in vertical streams. The rickety-clack rainfall pounding loud as a train at the roadside motel’s windows and awnings. The heavy clouds of Heaven above, opening, as if God were gutting an elk…

“It’s quantitative, the cucks and their boogeymen, using sticks of dynamite as dildos… Like it’s an easy enema, you know… But the cat’s out of the bag, and it’s the foulest of beasts…”

A flush crept up Fuckethead’s pendulous cheeks as he counted his blessings. His eyes popped. After all, he’d just escaped the rampaging lion that’d been terrorizing the city for weeks.

“A slooooow burn…”

Fuckethead then convulsed, briefly, then did angry fits of ballet as Europe’s “The Final Countdown” began blasting from a phone in the bathroom…

“ … “

“It’d been a slow but controlled burn, beyond any cozy assumptions. Our assumptions arrested in motion… Our gunboat rowing upstream. But hey, look, goddammit, calories do burn quicker when you’re running away from a rampaging lion.”

A reading light in the corner of the dim motel room was flickering. Neon, animated hieroglyphics were dancing on the room’s white walls. Moving like cartoons, the hieroglyphics displayed scenes of utter depravity: A man with one leg sawing off another man’s arm… A camel, with a large erect penis, doing jumping jacks and lunges…

“The slow burns… They were seasonal. Comforting as a kidney stone, welcome as a swarm of wasps at an outdoor wedding… But the burns, for all their flaws, the burns never shook the pillars, were never used as anti-think weapons… But the burns eventually blistered, became the violence of insatiable desire… Triggered a host of consequences…”

“It’s children’s worst nightmares, really, and even men of steel will rust… But that cowardly cat… That cat is fucking suicidal. That cat is going kamikaze… That cat is clawing its way out of a wet paper bag…”

A naked 90-year-old woman lay sound asleep atop the motel bed. Her frail body had been painted bubble-gum pink, head-to-toe, and she lay spread out like a starfish.

Fuckethead sat on the right edge of the motel bed and became illuminated by a white halo, surrounded by it, the same way the white of an eye surrounds the black. Then Fuckethead started sobbing and panting sighs as he sharpened a sickle…

A wrinkled lion suit was covering the old minifridge-sized TV, opposite the motel bed. The lion suit splotched in bloodstains…

“I’d been watching the Will Smith slapping Chris Rock video clip from the Oscars…” whimpered Fuckethead, choking back tears, “I watched the video 794 times. I watched it in slow motion. I watched it sped up. I watched it on a continuous loop for over two hours… I just couldn’t take my eyes away…”

Fuckethead really was weeping nonstop, shedding enough tears to rival a rain cloud. Fuckethead lamenting his many misfortunes, the captivity of his introspective exile…

“The pink elephant was the size of a show pony. But it was focused and prepared… It played matador with the lion. Got bloodied real good. But, even after innings, its tusks were still intact and gleaming like desert mirages… A real triumph of the spirit, I’d say…”

“You see? You see what happens? When we bring snowflakes and sensitivity into the lion’s den? You see what happens? When we worship Kardashians and butt stuff instead of an omnipotent God?”

“… After all, it’s that plunge, into the hazy idea of gloom. It’s the plunge that’s attractive, not the splat, not the mess left for the cleaners… Nah… It’s the pink elephant, on IG, with its dick out, bungee jumping off a house of cards…”

“It’s more than the implications of candlestick charts and international penis size surveys… It’s the question of who exactly is measuring thousands of penises, their methodology, and, obviously, such a survey’s motivations…”

Around Fuckethead flew a noisy, baseball-sized mosquito. The insect had a face like Mark Zuckerberg. But Fuckethead paid the mosquito no mind…

Bloomberg TV began broadcasting from the phone in the bathroom. The phone was propped above the toilet, and the phone’s reflection bounced off the toilet water…. But still… no news about the recent spate of lion encounters…

“It’s the masses kept clean by Reddit mods in trench coats… It’s every Hollywood action film where the hero has to race against time to rescue his kidnapped wife/girlfriend/daughter… It’s the silencers of voices… It’s the masses kept hungry by zookeepers… It’s the masses’ migration patterns, and the human farmers, human farming, until the masses lose that certain softness of youth… It was all once manageable, the creature’s pacing… But now… Now not so much, fucko… Now the burns are beginning to pick up… Burns imitating that feeling of Chernobyl…”

“We’re getting molested by invisible hands… Forces of fuck… God getting Uluru in a slingshot… But it’s the burns, the scarecrow sun still expanding… It’s an imp progressing with the reddest eye…”

Aside from his helmet, the pink bucket, with its two arrow slits for eyes, Fuckethead was entirely nude. His slim body slick as a dolphin’s. He’d long tired of shaving and waxing so he had all his body hair removed by electrolysis, and underneath his tailored business suits, in the boardroom, in panoramas of blond-wood serenity, Fuckethead would wear women’s underwear, often with crude penises, breasts, and curse words, drawn in eyeliner, on his chest and thighs.

“The yields, goddamn you, the yields weren’t matching. We were at an inversion point. And it was truly believed transitory forces, flare-ups, were at work. But it was wildfire. Hellfire. An uncontrolled burn. Nothing slow. Nothing like gonorrhea, or even a simple setting of genital hairs afire…”

“That lion… That lion is hunting, dammit. That lion is muting voices…”

Fuckethead rose from the motel bed and padded over to the window, which was misted.

“It’s the hungry ghosts, kept hungry, the ghosts getting herded, like sheep. It’s the ghost collectors, hedging, with their data and baseball card collections of souls. It’s the ultimate hippo bankers. Who says the lion is the foulest of beasts?!”

Fuckethead then prepped himself, sucked in a deep breath. After all, he was taking on the destroyer of delights, the killer of companionship…

“Stand tall as Tyson Fury… Be heavy and hot as a flaming pile of alligator guts…”

“It’s never an easy choice, the slowness, the heat. It’s never easy. And it’s never going to be easy. Never… Be it running away from a rampaging lion… Or firing a flamethrower at a housefly… Or even just slap-hunting holograms of Harvey Keitel… It’s not easy… And it’s nothing, NOTHING, like our pastime of forcing intellectuals to jump on a trampoline… Nothing at all… None of it is easy… Dammit… None of it… Axl Rose was wrong on all counts…”

Trumpet sounds blared from the phone above the toilet.

“It’ll be thousands, thousands of rampaging lions, thousands of lions swarming the city streets… It’ll be ‘The Running of The Lions’ instead of ‘The Running of The Bulls!’”

“It won’t be a pink elephant… Or a new popular mood disorder… It’ll be the next Madonna or Taylor Swift, covered in lion shit, running up a down-moving escalator.”

Fuckethead squatted and scooped up a utility hammer from the manky, orangish motel room carpet. Then Fuckethead rose, like an animated corpse, and his halo slowly shed, like a snake’s skin, falling to the floor in fading ribbons. Then

Fuckethead thrust his sickle into the air, like an Olympic torch. Then Fuckethead yodeled and kicked open the motel room's front door.

"Run, Fuckethead, RUN!!!!" shouted a young girl's voice.

Then Fuckethead ran, barefoot, right into the blood rain. He was a naked man, wearing only the pink bucket on his head. The crude drawings on his chest and thighs were tattoos and bled as Fuckethead tore off running into that cold, red rainy night.

Mr. Fuckethead, crying a string of pearls, ran clutching his hammer and sickle. Fuckethead yodeling and waving the instruments wildly as he sprinted into everything.

"The sun coming out from behind a cloud! A slow burn coming!!!!!!" Fuckethead roared, his frantic voice fading and finally vanishing with the rainfall. "IT'S A SLOW BURN!!!!!!! A SLOOO

GENDER FLUID

“Her gender changes by the hour.”

“By the hour?”

“By the hour.”

“So should you be calling her ‘her,’ if, like, uh, the… gender… is changing?”

“Last time I saw her she was identifying as female, so I’m confident to say yes.”

“It’s confusing. How do you even know she’s transitioning? Does she announce it, hourly, on her social media or something?”

“No, she wears a different color wristband. Actually, she has 60 of them, for different genders.”

“60 genders? How do you remember them all?”

“I don’t. I call her a ‘they.’”

“A they?”

“’They’ is plural, though, correct?”

“It used to be. Now it’s singular, in certain circumstances, such as non-binary.”

“I don’t understand what non-binary is.”

“It’s when…”

“Nah, actually, don’t tell me. I think I want to remain in the dark on that one.”

“A lot of people are sort of non-binary. Fat people with their hair in a bun. The fat obscures the chest, torso, so you can’t tell if those are tits or just fat rolls.”

“Hey, you can’t say ‘fat’…”

“There’s been a lot more men, fat men, straight men, painting their nails and toes, in addition to man-bun hairdos, and there’s also a trend in Korea of men wearing make-up.”

“Everything you’re saying is problematic. First off, to call someone ‘fat’ is body-shaming. That’s a no-no these days. Second, don’t say ‘straight’ anymore, say ‘cisgender.’ And lastly, don’t say ‘Korean’ men are wearing make-up, because you’re being horribly racist toward Asians.”

“Okay, so I’m still calling people ‘fat.’ I’m not giving up that one. I’m not relenting, surrendering to the PC mobs. I’m also never saying ‘cisgender,’ aside from in jest. And no, I did not say that ‘all Korean men’ wear make-up. But many, particularly younger ones, are. You can google it.”

“Just ‘google’ it. The solution to all life’s questions.”

“Google is the new God. IT lives in the sky, IT knows everything, IT has plans for everyone.”

“I think most prefer Google to God, these days.”

“Not in China. They ban both Google and God.”

“That explains a lot…”

“Google is the God we never wanted but always needed.”

“Is God non-binary? I’d think so.”

“I’m so sick of this identity politicking, new ‘vocabulary.’”

“I’m with you, in spirit, but times change. Language changes.”

“I understand that. And calling something stupid ‘gay’ always annoyed me. Racial slurs used as invective repulse me. But ‘fat?’ That’s not the same thing as a racial slur. Being fat is a choice. It’s not like we had any choice which skin color we’d have upon birth.”

“Erm, well, like your mother sorta had that choice. She could have been with a…”

“Oh, shut up!”

“Back to your friend. I’m looking at her IG. She’s changed genders into a unicorn sign with a rainbow atop it.”

“A rainbow sign?”

“So she’s a lesbian, maybe, for the next hour?”

“Other than prison, or college, is it possible to be gay for a short period of time? Like it’s a phase?”

“Gay for the stay?”

“Why are you asking me?”

“Because you’re gay.”

“Does that mean I speak for all gay people?”

“I mean, doesn’t it? Kinda?”

“I think you need sensitivity coaching.”

“What the fuck is sensitivity coaching?”

“It’s when someone teaches you to be more sensitive, take others’ feelings into account.”

“Is it a form of ‘life-coaching?’”

“No, it’s PC indoctrination.”

“It teaches you to…”

“I’m not interested.”

TERRORISTS ON MONKEY BARS

There was a loud bang.

I spun around in my seat. I was on the morning train, riding to the office. Though I was wearing headphones, I still heard the sound clearly. It was a bang. A sound like a firework, a car engine backfiring… or a gunshot…

Alarmed, my pulse raced; my heart hammered in my chest. I instinctively scanned about the train carriage, searching for the source of the sound. To my surprise, I saw nothing. Furthermore, no one appeared to share my angst. The passengers sat still as statues, fixed to their newspapers, books or digital devices, and an elderly man with a head of Einstein hair silently stared out the window, gaping, eyes wide open, at the passing scenery of the city.

Hhhhhm Hhhhhhhm, I sniffed in a stack of air. Tried to mimic a bomb-sniffing dog. Tried to smell for anything. Any sort of burning, a scent, an odor, a fire, plastic, a gas, anything that might trace the source. But I smelled nothing, aside from that public transit scent, that scent of cleaning fluids, metal, machinery, and huddled masses.

Then I tried to calm myself. Settled back into the cushion of my seat. Although the a/c was blasting in the train, I'd begun to sweat like I was sitting in a hot car with its windows up on a summer's day, and I could feel my collared dress shirt stuck like foil to my back. I tried breathing deeply, to relax, but then a jolt of shock cleared my sinuses when I spotted a passenger, to my right, seated two rows up from me.

He was a young, maybe early 20ish, Arab man. He had a black beard that fell to his chest and wore a long sheet white robe with a matching white skull cap. What's more, he appeared nervous, terribly nervous. And was shifting, stirring in his seat, constantly adjusting and pulling at his collar.

Furthermore, this was 2011, near the ten-year anniversary of 9/11, so of course, my thoughts shifted to the worst. I couldn't take my mind off the images I'd seen on the news. Those images of kamikaze planes torpedoing into the twin towers. Those black and copper clouds of death. Those grainy photos of Bin Laden and those passport photos of the 9/11 hijackers.

Then I thought to the video montages of Al Qaeda terrorists on monkey bars. Then I questioned what the terrorists were doing, exactly, on the monkey bars…

Then my nervousness increased. Tenfold. I imagined the passenger, that suspicious passenger, strapped with a suicide vest. Ready to detonate. The terrorist jumping to his feet, yelling out whatever, and yanking the chain, taking the whole train with him as he went to see the virgins.

And what could anyone do about that? Jump on him? That's the same as jumping on a live hand grenade. Or could one politely ask him to stop? Try to talk him out of it? Just what was it that George W. Bush said about negotiating with terrorists?

As we slowed, inched into our next stop, the young man rose to his feet.

"Oh no, this is it. We're all going to die!" I ruminated. He's going to scream out whatever and yank the chain, blow us all to bits! My whole life started flashing before my eyes, and I thought of all the unachieved aspirations on my bucket list…

But his body seemed to slack as he stood, and his chest filled with air, and when he exhaled, his lips twisted to a wry smile. Then he patiently exited the train along with the other passengers.

THE GRASS IS GREENER BY THE GRAVEYARD

Not too many folks cared to live across the street from a graveyard.

But Tony didn't mind. He appreciated his lifeless neighbors, their unbreaking quietude. And he enjoyed looking out his bay windows, gazing at the rows of gravestones, crypts and tombs lining the emerald field.

To Tony, his graveyard view was an affirmation of time's impermanence. And hence its importance.

"Living on the cheap usually entails crime, roach infestation, noise pollution, but not here," Tony told his sole companion, his Katy Perry lookalike sex doll. The doll bore a striking similarity to the singer. He'd customized it to appear exactly as the pop diva herself. Tits and all.

Tony's closest neighbor, a shut-in, another Operation Iraqi Freedom vet, lived three doors down in the subdivision's only other occupied house. The residential development had never taken off, never recovered from the Great Recession.

Next door to Tony, the ranch-style, single-family home resembled the carcass of a deer that'd been eaten alive by wolves. Its piping stripped. Its empty shell picked clean by thieves and vermin and transformed into a graffitied cenotaph, a monument to avaricious capitalism, currently only occupied by rats and raccoons…

Tony's house, too, had been abandoned but hadn't been ravaged by pests and thieves and he'd agreed to purchase the distressed property for mere pennies on the dollar.

"Not a lotta homebuyers wanna live by a graveyard," admitted the seller, a rep from the local bank. The overweight fellow wore a rumpled, rat-gray suit and too much aftershave and seemed to glare at Tony with a perplexed look, maybe wondering if Tony were opening a meth lab or planning a crypto-scam…

"Why would anyone want to live on a bluff overlooking a graveyard?" Tony could read the thoughts, sense trepidation through the language of the agent's shifty, small black eyes.

But there was good reason for Tony's decision. As Tony aged, he'd developed phonophobia and misophonia, severe phobias of sound.

Random sounds, noises, even the mundane, such as coughing or sneezing were terrifying ordeals. And sudden loud sounds, especially, had transformed from mild annoyances into physically painful, excruciating ailments. Simple knocks on the door sent chills plaiting up and down Tony's spine. Thumps from upstairs neighbors enraged him, got him grinding his teeth, gave him grating headaches, had him contemplating homicides…

Honking cars, loud car stereos, slamming doors, lawnmowers, leaf blowers, a creaky air conditioner, all of it increasing, every day, in tortuous intensity, arousal and anguish…

And his last apartment… The place was alive. The walls and ceilings like malicious sentient beings… the place stirring… stabbing icepicks into his ears, the building animated by the cruelest, most violent sounds.

His last apartment had been a hated, horrible place, a hellhole with its thin walls, its voices... Its fucking tap dancer living upstairs…. Its footfalls and thumps of neighbors' jabbering movements…. The miserable place's ugly noises violent and destructive as a cage fighter's fists to the face.

"Phonophobia and misophonia had been the diagnosis," Tony told Katy. Admiring the lavish blush of color mantling her cheeks, and the golden flecks, the glittery eye shadow above Katy's blue-green peepers, he began to appreciate what an excellent listener she'd become.

"But what we needed most was a change in perspective."

Tony spent most of his time in the master bedroom. He'd prop Katy in bed, lay with her, and would carry her to the kitchen, eat with her seated across the table. He'd even fix a plate for her.

Since moving next to the cemetery, Tony had never been happier. He finally had what he needed. He had Katy and fast internet and was still close enough to the city that he could have packages delivered.

Most of all, he loved the quiet. The purity, the cleanliness, the beautiful sound of silence.

Silence, to him… was bliss. Its solitude soft, warm as a loving embrace… The quiet a kind of luxury…

And it was this quiet he most desired. A quiet as quiet as the field of corpses in his window... A quiet as quiet as outer space. Quiet as death itself…

After cleaning Katy up and putting her down for an afternoon nap, Tony took a rest from screentime. Gazing out his kitchen window, he peeked up at the sun,

the humungous hoop of gold hanging in the clear blue sky, while a warm silence nestled in over the graveyard.

Sipping cinnamon tea, Tony then gazed at the symmetrical rows of tombstones. He pondered that one day he'd be dead too. On the other side of the grass.

Then he thought that one day in the future, the sun, the humungous hoop of gold, would burn out, just like an old lightbulb. That everything would end. That humans and every other living creature were tourists, transients, hobos on a revolving rock, infinitesimal specks of matter hurtling through the cosmos. That Earth itself would one day be a big graveyard.

And a tranquility coursed through him as he considered just how quiet the day after the end of the world would be…

HUNTING THE MONSTER

The bus was rickety, bouncy, and probably not safe to drive. There were holes in the seats, some of the holes plastered over with duct tape.

Adorning the back of nearly every seat were curse words, lewd poems and crude drawings of genitals, scraggly graffiti, and globs of gum.

The bus stank too. Stank of that certain smell of school and children.

Behind the wheel sat the only adult aboard… A 40ish man about the size of a hippopotamus, his pockmarked face shaded by a red mesh Cincinnati Reds baseball cap…

On mornings when it was clear, or if only a light mist were curling from the green lake near the school, all the kids, the jocks, misfits, nerds, cheerleaders, all of them, would pop their heads up and crane their necks toward the water. It was

said there was a creature living in the lake. Something like a dinosaur. Something like the Loch Ness Monster.

Several townspeople claimed to have seen it. A few shadowy photos existed, but nothing conclusive. The town had hoped to style the local monster as a tourist attraction, eager to attract monster hunters, thrill seekers, adventurists, social media influencers, TV and movies, but for whatever reason, the local monster never garnered much attention.

There wasn't a clear enough picture. There wasn't enough of a compelling backstory about the monster, either. Basically, no one outside the town cared.

But inside the town, the monster was as alive as ever. People were terrified to walk near the lake at night. And throughout recent years, several pets in the township had turned up missing, were thought to have been eaten by the monster.

Every morning, conversation in the school bus would grind to an immediate halt. Almost as if God Herself had pressed a button. Total silence ensuing once the bus approached the lake. The kids stopping what they were doing or saying, to turn and gawk at the lake... Kids scanning the murky distance, searching the panorama. Phones and tablets raised, pointed at the lake's still green waters. The kids' faces twisted in anticipation; their mouths parted slightly in hopes of snapping a photo of the ever-elusive dinosaur.

Finally, on one foggy late spring morning, in the back of the bus, two teens in backward baseball caps sneered at the lake, and bade it farewell.

WELCOMING THE JUNGLE

The sky had been overcast for days. Not that it's anything unusual. During the monsoon season there'd often be days, maybe 5 or 6, consecutively, where barely a lumen of light peeks out of the milky sky.

However, what was unusual was the hue of the sky. Instead of being cloudy, with clouds the color of cow's milk, the heavens above were colored purple. A startling neon purple, in the daytime, that pumped an intense radiance, a glow, that was practically blinding. At nighttime, the purple darkened, to a spongy purple-black, appearing like the fur of a panther.

Local and national newscasters, scientists, meteorologists, social media, et al., no one could explain the purple sky. It was as if a purple dome had descended over the sprawling city, the purple sky trailing off into blue at the city's outskirts.

It was at this time that the chemtrails began appearing.

The chemtrails would manifest themselves as vaporous, gray, or in various coruscating colors…

The chemtrails were soon accompanied by mysterious monkeys that looked like baboons. Though the baboons were as purple as the sky, light or dark purple, depending on the time of day, and once the chemtrails spread across the sky, the purple baboons, usually in packs of four or five, would be seen running through the city streets, chasing the chemtrails, the packs of monkeys in uniform motion, galloping, frantically, toward the chemtrails.

The purple monkeys were only seen in conjunction with the chemtrails, the monkeys steadfast in their pursuit. The creatures mesmerized and magnetized. The creatures showing no concern for anything other than moving toward the chemtrails. If while in pursuit of a chemtrail, a monkey were run down by a city bus, the other monkeys would continue, leave the felled monkey behind.

The monkeys were singular in their focus.

But where the monkeys came from, where they went, remained a mystery.

Originally it was thought to be a prank, a crypto company stunt or internet influencers run amok. But the monkeys, chemtrails kept appearing, in greater numbers too…

It wouldn't be long until similar packs of elephants, light and dark purple elephants, appeared chasing after the chemtrails, surging through the city streets. Unlike the monkeys, though, the elephants were enormous, menacing and caused

massive destruction, destroying property, stomping on people, smashing them like bugs.

The police, overwhelmed and unable to contain the monkeys, and certainly feckless against the elephants' onslaughts, were to be relieved by the army, but as the armed forces arrived at the city limits, they were obstructed by furious mobs, international squadrons of animal rights protestors demanding no harm befall the purple monkeys or elephants.

Explosive arguments overtook social media and cable news, and rival political factions blamed one another for the purple monkey, elephant attacks and unexplained chemtrails…

Panic overtook the city as more chemtrails popped up and increasingly belligerent packs of purple elephants and monkeys began to swarm the city, effectively claiming dominion, and panicked residents were fleeing in droves.

The chemtrails then took on a life of their own. The chemtrails touching down, like tornados. The chemtrails walking like legs. Their touch like lasers, the chemtrails incinerating infrastructure, turning steel and concrete to ashes. The chemtrails angling in different directions, blasting beams of light, lasering and searing, toppling buildings...

Eventually the disparate chemtrails coalesced. Formed into a wild, kaleidoscopic electric swirl that circled, covered the sky, like a blanket, the heavens awash in a violent smorgasbord of colors.

As the colors continued across the sky, over what was once morning, there began a horrible beeping, like on a plane about to crash into a mountain. The beeping sounding from every phone, speaker and electronic device… Louder and louder… The beeping gaining in volume, rising above asperity. A siren's call…

The city's remaining residents emerged from their hiding spots. What had probably been fear coloring their faces had shifted to a severe placidity. The stone-faced urbanites doing "Buss Down" TikTok dances, shucking and jiving into the city streets, where they were joined by similar dour-faced dancing packs of purple elephants and monkeys.

All the city's creatures danced and swayed side by side. Their movements synchronized as the ticks of a clock. Their eyes illuminated in implicit understanding.

Then the beeping abruptly stopped. And the city streets dissolved into a dark green quicksand. Buildings, bridges, roads, vehicles, people, purple monkeys and elephants, everything all plunging below as if through the thin ice of a barely frozen pond. The city emptying into an endless green expanse… The skies clearing, back to blue… Welcoming the jungle…

LETTER TO A DEAD MAN

Dear _____ ,

You'll probably never read this. You might even be dead. But I was just thinking about you. I was just thinking about how we used to be best friends.

But that was then. This is now. Now, I don't even know you. I could pass by you on the street, or in a store, and not recognize you. How crazy is that? We grew up together and now I don't even know what you look like!

Or maybe I would recognize you but wouldn't say anything because I wouldn't quite know what to say. What the hell do you say to someone you've not seen in 20 years? What is there to say? After all the nostalgia and backslaps, what is there to talk about? What would we have in common?

Let's face it. We're basically strangers. You've moved on. I've moved on. We've ventured down our respective paths. We've found our niches. We've made new friends, lives and lovers, and had two decades of successes and failures. Any me and any you, every me and every you, that we knew, is gone. That person is a ghost now, living on, spectrally, in the occasional haunting of a thought.

That person has ceased to actively exist.

It's okay. *Really, it is.* I'm not one for nostalgia. I see time as linear, progressing. At least it should be that way. I always pity those living in the past.

Remember ____ ? Oh, man, I saw him a few years back. All the drugs we took in high school, I think they've rotted his mind. Or maybe he's just going crazy. Wasn't his uncle crazy? Didn't his uncle OD and die? _____ is way gone, man. He won't even pick up his phone. I messaged him on Facebook, like three years ago, and he still hasn't replied.

But yeah, I bring him up because the last time I saw him he was rambling about a person from 25 years ago, 30 years ago, almost, now, and he was going on about it as if it all happened yesterday. He was fuming, I mean, really, fuming, and ruminating over an incident from *30 damn years ago*. He was there, in that time. He was crystallized in that time. He was a hostage to that time.

That's not me. I'm not a hostage. I don't have Stockholm Syndrome. I'm here. I'm in the here and now. Look, I live thousands of miles away, oceans and mountains away, from our old neighborhood. I'm miles away from those days, literally and figuratively. I'm not there. That time is history. It's over. Its sun has set.

Not that we can't remember it. Not that we can't learn from it. I'm trying to learn from it. I'm trying to grow and learn from my mistakes. But I'm not occupied by my mistakes. Even the worst mistakes. Even the most tragic of mistakes, mistakes that might still fall under a statute of limitations. Even the people I irreparably hurt. Even the people who irreparably hurt me. I'm over it. I wouldn't say I'm apathetic. I wouldn't say I'm bitter. I'm just… *Over it.*

I really hope you're the same way. I'm hoping you're not a hostage to those memories. Like when we got robbed at gunpoint. Thinking back, that was scary! What if those hoodies had squeezed the trigger? One or both of us wouldn't be here. 26 years ago, we'd have been dead, lying like stick figures in pools of blood. Lying cold and dead next to the crooked basketball hoop in your backyard.

And over what? A shitty bag of weed? Maybe it was karma since you packed it with seeds and stems to fatten its weight... What if we angered the Ganja Gods… I don't know…

But no, I'm not dwelling on anything. I'm not there. I'm not in that backyard, on that balmy summer night, watching fecklessly, mute and hot with defeat, that certain sort of sunken, victimized defeat that digs deep as your soul…

And those hoodies, I think one was South African, from his accent, yeah, I don't know, and I wouldn't wonder much about what became of them.

They could be in prison, like _____, that bully from middle school. Did you hear that he robbed a bank, shot a police dog, and is doing 20 years in prison? Maybe they're all off in jail together… The bully, the South African hoodies…

Or those hoodies could be CEOs of multinational corporations. CEOs of corporate cannabis companies. Or they could be like _____, living in their parents' basements, tormented by voices and ghosts.

Isn't that what memories are? Ghosts?

Like I said, I don't know you, but I hope you're alive. I hope you're okay.

I visited the old neighborhood not too long ago. Both of our houses had been torn down. They were both torn down, built over, made into gaudy McMansions. It is strange to think that neither of our old houses exist anymore. That someone is living there, new families living in our childhood homes.

There's a yuppie right now living in the McMansion that arose over your old house. A Saab-driving yuppie. A yuppie and his family, and they probably named their kid "Augustus" or something pretentious like that.

And Augustus is playing on a swing set, right where we were robbed at gunpoint. Augustus probably sleeps in a room built over the room where you lost your virginity. He's there. Augustus is in the present. Augustus doesn't know our ghosts. Nor should he.

Just think of it, there's a person, right now, wearing your old clothes, wearing my old clothes. There's a person driving your old car. There's a person living in your old apartment, and you'll never know him or her and they'll never know you, but you have a connection to them.

There's an outdoor city market in Nigeria that sells "Dead White Man's Clothes," clothes donated to charities, clothes eventually sold on the streets of Lagos.

Someone in Africa is probably wearing your father's gray corduroy pants. Your father's corduroy pants and a Buffalo Bills 1993 Super Bowl Champions shirt.

But that's the cycle of life. It turns and moves and will until the universe expands into a void. It's the cycle of creation and decimation. There's material from the Big Bang in your DNA and mine! And once we're dead, our molecules will return to the atmosphere, into space, into the cosmos... It's all interconnected, we're all interconnected, and there's a beauty and a horror to that...

How an atom looks like a solar system, and so forth…

Like the strawberry you ate that was grown in human feces, human waste trucked in from New York City. And molecules of every dead poet were in your soy milk…

It's the cycle of life. Like how Walt Whitman wrote about grass being the hair of the dead. It's like that. It's all interconnected.

Pretty much, this very letter is a communication from a ghost to a ghost.

But if I'm ever a ghost, like a real ghost, I would probably haunt our old neighborhood. Haunt the house built over my old house. I wouldn't be a poltergeist, though. I wouldn't bother anyone. I'd just be there. Watching. As a voyeur. I could see most ghosts being voyeurs. Silent spectators. Ghosts watching the living like the living watch Netflix.

Wherever you are, whoever you are, whatever you exists now, I hope you're well. I'll write you again in ten years. Let's try to talk every ten years.

Sincerely,

_____

MIGOS SONGS

"Type shit… type shit… type shit..."

It's a song by the Migos. I've been listening to it nonstop. I find its melody enchanting, its beat hypnotic.

When I first listened to it, it made my ears prick up, and caused me to lift from my chair.

The beat animated me. The bass controlled me. The sonic vibrations, coursing through every inch, every fiber of my being. My body possessed. The spirit, the groove inside me, in every bit of my DNA, every blood cell, every synapse.

Now, anytime I hear Migos, I begin to dance. My arms thrusting in arc movements, my legs kicking as if I were Irish river-dancing. The spirit pacing me through various aerobic gyrations.

My body forming into a pretzel shape, a yoga position I cannot contemplate, as I stretch and wonder, contemplate the lyrics… What exactly does get one trending… Aside from a celebrity, or politician, who's frequently in the news, anyway, or a disaster, a seismic weather event, how does one trend? And how does that correspond to one's bitch getting hit?

And who is this bitch being hit? Why would the thing that brings that attention, that trending, why does it also lead to a bitch being hit? Who is this bitch? Who is she? Why is she being hit?

Is this a hit involving a hand or a penis? Or both? And is she only a metaphorical bitch?

It's always occurred to me that hitting bitches, ala Ray Rice, is wrong. It's not a thing polite people do.

However, the Migos posit this in hypothetical fashion. The Prodigy song "Smack My Bitch Up" was about dancing, or masturbating, I think I heard, but I digress…

Another Migos song I like. *"Get from 'round…,"* go the lyrics.

Lightning cleaved the sky outside, first time I heard it, and it was as if the song were a message from God.

Get from 'round! But where is the 'round? Get away from around here. It's been truncated. It's trenchant, really, and easy to express disdain in this way.

I wonder who exactly the Migos were referring to, who is this person they have disdain for? What had he/she done? Like the bitch being hit, hypothetically, what was the purpose, the cause of this enmity?

Altogether, the Migos' songs are melodic, rhythmic, and fun experiences. However, I was plunged into existential questioning. Wondering, who were the targets?

Admittedly, I was left with more questions than answers. Although I most enjoyed the musical stylings.

Note: This was written before the tragic events of November 1, 2022.

LOVE.

MOTORWAY TO BRISTOL

They'd been on the road for hours. The sky was soupy, overcast, a typical Bristolian morning.

"I just can't get why the British drive on the wrong side of the road."

"Maybe it's you driving on the wrong side of the road? Ever think a' that?"

“They say the sun never sets on the British Empire. So how come it never rises in England?”

“Oh, it rises sometimes. Like last year, once or twice. I think summer was on a Wednesday…”

“Right, we get a good stretch of sunshine. Maybe a whole day or two.”

“Is there a ‘bad’ sunshine?”

“Obviously you have never visited Las Vegas.”

“And I intend to keep it that way.”

There was a road sign they passed, for a place called “Black Boy Hill.”

“’Black Boy’ Hill? What the fuck? That is so racist.”

“Bristol was a slave trading capital.”

“Seriously? I didn’t know the British had slaves.”

“They didn’t teach us that in school.”

“Look, America was a British colony, founded by slaveowners. It’s deductive reasoning…”

“Fucking Paul Revere…”

“Benedict Arnold, the cunt. I bet he had like a whole cotton plantation.”

“Everyone had slaves at some point.”

“Everyone still has slaves. Do you have a mortgage, debt? A job you can’t afford to quit? If so, you’re a slave. A wage slave.”

“Fuck you! I’m not a slave.”

“You’re a slave to the man.”

“Who exactly is the man?”

“It varies, by context and place.”

“How so?”

“It’s whomever you want to blame for your problems.”

“The man is always responsible. The man is a scapegoat for your failures. It’s always the ‘man’ and not you. It’s always another person holding you back, another person in control. But at the end of the day, no one is *really* in control.”

“I remember a quote from Kurt Vonnegut, something like, ‘Hell is waking up one day to see your high school class is running the country.’”

“Everyone’s high school class is running a country, running the world…”

“But is it, actually, *your* high school class? Most governments are run by the elite. Those are people who go to the best schools, are spawned by the richest families. It’s the best of the best, the cream of the crop. They aren’t you and me. They aren’t everyday people.”

“Is that a bad thing? That elites run the country? Most people are fucking stupid. Look at reality TV, comments online, the very existence of TikTok, or most popular entertainment. Would you want a random idiot from Twitter running the country?”

“I think that might have…”

“Oh, don’t start with that.”

“I’m a misanthrope.”

“You’re too pessimistic. Look, humans have only been around, what, 250,000 years, and the planet for four billion years? Look at the cavemen, monkey-men running around in ancient times, fuckin’ chased by sabretooth tigers, woolly mammoths and shit. There was a day and time that we literally had to hunt for our meals. Now you can press buttons and food will magically cook in a machine or be brought to your front door. Soon they’ll even have drones that fly food to you.”

“Think how George Washington woulda reacted if he’d seen popcorn popping in a microwave or been handed a smartphone…”

“How many people from today’s society would survive in ancient times? Like, the fat guy, the size of a milk cow, that we saw at the breakfast buffet today. Would he be able to start a fire? Run through the woods, kill, gut, and cook an animal? I

mean, how many times have you eaten meat? But have you ever been hunting? Have you ever killed and then gutted an animal?"

"I'm not Joe Rogan."

"Exactly. But our ancestors were Joe Rogans. They were climbing trees, shooting arrows, strangling goats to death, fucking gutting goats and shit with nothing but their bare hands."

"Nah, I'd be a vegetarian, I think, if I had to live in ancient times. I'd go eat flowers and grass. I'd be the original vegan."

"Fucking hell, Joe Rogan got $200 million, and yet he still chokes animals to death with his bare hands."

"Then can you say nothing's progressed?"

HOW TO SPOT A DEAD TREE

Well, it's not that easy. You might think the tree is dead. It's withered, of course, the tree, it's leaning forward, as if being pushed by a ghost.

But it might be alive. Because appearances are deceiving. It might be planted in blood. That's right. Blood. There are regions of the world where witches converge, under the dark blanket of night, and they bring barrels of blood, then tip the barrels over, slowly and carefully, splashing and sprinkling the red liquid over the ground, around the exposed roots.

Why do they do this?

It's unclear. There are folk tales of the witches trapping souls in the saggy trees… The witches again arresting and imprisoning souls… That the soul inside the tree is fighting to break free, and that saps the tree of its sap, of its lifeforce.

Then there are tales of the blood, the captured soul revitalizing the tree, and that in ancient times, a goat or a useless person might be sacrificed for the good of the whole.

Then there was a folk tale I heard about an inspector from a township, a Swedish town, near the Arctic. There'd been many trees dying in the area. Trees unexpectedly dying, keeling over like a person in cardiac arrest. No one knew what was going on. So the local government dispatched an inspector, a learned man, a scientist, to gather evidence and inspect the trees.

It was when the inspector stepped in a puddle, and discovered blood on his boot, that's when he saw a witch, hiding behind a tree. Her head poking through the branches like an angry bird, and the inspector noted the witch's nose was long as a carrot.

The inspector shouted for the witch to halt, but the witch launched into the air, on a broomstick, and she stuck her tongue out at the inspector, wagged it like a naughty child, and then zipped off into the wild of the forest.

However, in haste the witch had left behind a bucket of blood, and it was discovered the blood had been exhumed from a fresh corpse. That the witches were practicing a sacred, ancient ritual, gathering blood from corpses and watering the trees with the blood…

How many trees have blood roots? How many trees contain a captured soul? At this point, it's uncertain. But it could be any apparently dead tree you see. So, please, if you're going to fell a tree or cut a tree branch, be mindful… You might be sawing off someone's arm…

DOOR DASH

The knock on my door jolted me awake. The knocking was loud. Police loud. Groggily, I pushed myself out of the warm bed, and I was stung by the shock of my bedroom's chill. Moving through my apartment, the cold weighed heavily on me… As if the cold itself were a living creature, an arctic octopus of sorts, clamping and coiling, burying its icy tentacles into my bones…

My teeth chattered. And I struggled to lift my hand to the front door handle.

But I prevailed. I pushed down the L-shaped handle, and yellow light from the hallway poured over me. The light was so bright that I squinted and experienced a headrush, a touch of vertigo. Then I staggered, my legs wobbly.

Regaining my composure, I slid my eyes open and gawked at what I saw. A box. A giant box, a giant hot pink box, had been left in front of my door. But there was no note, no invoice, and more curiously, no deliveryman in sight.

The box was tall, about six feet high, and wide, about three feet from end to end, but it appeared light, as it was made of cardboard. Stepping closer, to examine the box, I saw that my name was written in red ink on the front of the box, in neat cursive handwriting. Only my first name, though. No last name. And no address or phone number. Yet somehow the box had found me, had found my apartment.

Okay, I didn't hear a ticking from the box, so I was confident it wasn't a bomb. I'm also not politically active, nor do I have any diabolical enemies, so I doubted I was in mortal danger from the package.

I suspected it was a joke. Maybe a coworker playing a prank. So, guardedly, I took hold of the box.

While the box had initially appeared light, it was heavy as a boulder when I got my hands on it, and I was barely able to drag it inside. But I did. I felt like a coolie, or as if I were a sailor pulling in an anchor. But I persevered. And I brought the box into my apartment, flicked on the light, then popped my head out into the hallway, peered around in both directions, but again saw nothing.

Slamming the door shut, I cautiously inspected the box. It appeared more as a cube than a box and didn't have tape on it. I couldn't see any openings either. Touching my finger to it, I confirmed it was cardboard, and not very thick, either. So I knew what to do.

I ambled over to the kitchen, grabbed a boxcutter, and came back. Nervously I clicked open the blade, stabbed into the box at its left edge, and cut it open slowly, feeling like a first-time surgeon.

I had sliced open a flap. Now came the moment of truth. It was time to unveil whatever was inside the curious pink container…

My heart began thumping so hard I thought it might explode. My hands trembling like Michael J. Fox's. But I steadied myself enough to tug the flap upwards and then to the right. As if a blindfold had been removed, my eyes bulged wide as I peered into the box and found something I never would have anticipated.

Another pink box. With exactly the same appearance. Only slightly smaller. So I cut into that as well. The temperature in the room suddenly plummeting lower, my breaths becoming puffs of mist, and I was feeling like a butcher in a freezer, slicing into slabs of meat.

Once I cut into the second box, I discovered there was another box, this one slightly smaller… So I chopped into that box and found another pink box, again with exactly the same appearance, and again only slightly smaller!

Furiously, I cut into that box, and once more found the same thing. Another pink box, another spitting image, only slightly smaller!

So once more, I cut and cut, lifting out each box, my living room becoming an icy hot mess of empty pink boxes, the mangled, severed boxes strewn like felled pink soldiers on a battlefield.

My fingers felt like popsicles as I got down to a box that was about the size of a brick. Once I cut it open, I found that it didn't contain any other box. It only contained a note, a simple, handwritten note, on a sheet of A4 printer paper, in the same neat cursive writing.

The note read: "Time is the more precious resource."

LOCAL GRAVESTONES BEGIN DISAPPEARING

I was hanging from the ceiling, watching a soap opera on my phone. A soap opera from another country. An Asian country. I'm not sure which one.

They were speaking a language that sounded full of peaks and rises, high tones, and guttural sounds, and not a single word I could comprehend.

You know, I like watching soap operas from foreign countries, soap operas in foreign languages, languages I don't speak. That way I can invent, imagine the dialogue. Soap operas are better that way, I think.

Walking across the ceiling, I decided to kick back, and I flipped and pirouetted, mid-air, then landed on my feet perfectly, like a gymnast. Then I stripped off my onesie, lay on the emptiness and depleted beauty of the oil-black dragonstone flooring.

A drone flew in through my only window, crashing through the portal-shaped circle; then a cold can of Belgian beer dropped from the drone's belly. I caught the can with one hand. Then the robot performed an aerial U-turn, buzzed off back out the broken window, beeping twice upon its exit.

I cracked open the can and began sipping the beer. It was ice cold and refreshing. I closed my eyes for a second, licked my lips and savored the fruity sweet flavor, felt thankful for the existence of Belgium, and then resumed watching my phone, which was propped up on my belly, right in the slope where my solar plexus meets my mountain of man.

Then there was a knock on my door. I was naked at the time, naked and drinking beer and somehow I thought the knock might be my houseplant playing tricks on me again.

Look, okay, yes, my houseplant says nice and terrible things. It says the apartment is crappy, but it's mine, ours, and we like dumps. Dumps got soul. Dumps got personality and charm. This place doesn't have a hole in the ceiling and no raccoons, either, unlike our last place, so, yeah…

I thought the knocking was a mistake, or were voices, sounds in my head. But then there was another knock on the door. This one louder. So I remained naked and set my beer onto the floor.

I barked like a dog, and crawled on my belly, toward the door. I kept hearing the knocks too. They were REAL! The knocks getting louder and musical, the knocks banging in a rhythm like a college football marching band. A drumline at an HBCU.

I rose to my feet and started dancing along to the beat, the sound emanating from the door. Shimmying, grooving and moving, doing old hip-hop dance moves,

like the Running Man, the Cabbage Patch, and one I invented that looked like epileptic sign language.

My houseplant told me to dress, so I bent down, scooped up a worn sock from the floor and slipped it over my manhood. Then I screamed like a heavy metal singer and very carefully pulled open my apartment's door, which, in that moment, looked like a big blue block of rotted cheddar cheese.

Golden light flooded in from the hallway, and I smelled a noxious stench, as if hair were on fire.

Swiveling my gaze, panoramically, I couldn't see a soul. But then I heard a cough, like someone clearing his/her throat.

Looking downward, I found a dwarf standing in my doorway. The dwarf was pudgy and androgynous. His face was a clenched fist. The dwarf was also naked, also with a crotch sock covering his genitals.

The dwarf's hair was a tangled bush of fire, reminding me of an old Jane's Addiction album cover, and the dwarf was holding a thin gray gravestone, hoisting it up in the air, like Moses with the Ten Commandments… This was probably the gravestone, I figured, that the dwarf had been using to drum on my door…

The dwarf coughed again, a hacking, throaty cough, and it concerned me that possibly the dwarf had the Wuhan Virus.

The dwarf's eyes were narrowed, just two dark creases, and the dwarf's nose was huge, took up half the dwarf's face, looked like a small potato, and the dwarf's mouth was so small it looked like the letter "ₒ" in super small font.

After coughing again, the dwarf chortled and cried out, "Begin disappearing!"

Then the dwarf flung the gravestone, and the thin stone square landed at my feet, hitting the hallway floor with a thundering gong sound. The sound whapping me. A massive wave cresting and crashing from the mistiest shadows… My heartrate rising, vomit pushing up to my throat… The sound then shedding its mass, molting into a low rumble, like a distant surge of the sea…

Fire quickly spread from the dwarf's head. The bright orange flames washing over the dwarf's tiny body, all three feet of it. The flames swirling to a lustrous glow.

Then the wave of flames practically erased the dwarf, as if they were an eraser wiping over a whiteboard.

In seconds, the dwarf and wave of flames were a pile of cinder, emerald ashes that lay in a triangular pile, like a pyramid… Maybe an Irish pyramid, if the Irish ever made pyramids…

And I wondered, this emerald, this green, did this mean… this was a leprechaun of some sort? And I wondered why he'd chosen to visit me. Then I remembered the news headline I'd seen, something about someone stealing gravestones. The dwarf must have been the perpetrator. Who else could it have been?

And why? WHY!?

Then I glanced at the inscription on the gravestone. It read, in large cursive lettering, "Local gravestones begin disappearing."

JOB INTERVIEW WITH AN ASSHOLE

The office had a sharp chill to it. And it wasn't just the frigid bite of the a/c. Nope. There was more. Something in the air, something sinister. Walking into that office… The bad vibe was omnipotent, noticeable as a softball-sized coffee stain on a white shirt…

I had arrived for a job interview. A fledgling website was looking to add to its marketing staff…

This was before the explosion of smartphones and social media. This was Internet 1.0. The initial goldrush stage of the Net. The "Dotcom Boom." When anything seemed possible. Where every day you could watch TV commercials featuring tow-truck drivers boasting of owning private islands and talking baby Internet millionaires.

My own website wasn't going anywhere, though, unfortunately, so I decided to gain experience by working for an established site, and I was hoping I could learn, make contacts, as I developed my ideas.

Hell, I'd only been out of college for a few months and had been temping, doing gopher work, answering phones and such, and I figured this job might be an excellent steppingstone.

But what I discovered certainly wasn't what I had envisioned…

The awkwardness began when I entered the office. Like I mentioned, there was a cold, uncomfortable feeling just walking in there. Not that I'm one of those entitled pricks who expects smiles and red carpets, trumpets blaring upon my arrival, but the icy vibe I got from the receptionist at the front desk was discomfiting. The receptionist sat slouched in her chair, with a deathly pale, defeated look on her face. Upon introducing myself, she barely managed eye contact, and spoke in only timid, squeaky little bursts.

Walking through the office wasn't much better. It was a big bright office, with sprawling floor-to-ceiling windows, sunlight spilling in from all angles. It was an open office too, with three rows of five or six desks, with no cubicles or dividers. But instead of the conviviality you might expect in that open and effulgent a room, there existed only a gloomy silence.

Everyone, to a person, was solemn, and kept their heads down and their miserable faces pointed at their computers.

Walking through the office, I felt like I was at a funeral. The atmosphere was that morose.

When I stepped into the corner office, the boss was younger than I expected, not much older than me, maybe mid-20s. He appeared somewhat disheveled, thin, and his tangly mop of sandy brown hair had been pushed up into a frohawk, and his unshaven face was pulled into the puckered expression of someone biting into something bitter.

I might have expected him to rise, greet me, shake my hand, but he did none of those things. He remained throned behind a curiously tall desk. Sitting down to

the thinly padded chair facing his desk, it seemed more as if I were entering a courtroom than a job interview.

Gazing upwards, I screwed on my best smile and tried not to focus on the wrinkly appearance of his soda-red Von Dutch shirt. Perhaps he was one of those computer programmer types glued to a computer screen all day, the sort that didn't care much about ironing his clothes. Or maybe he didn't know how. Like, he could code, knew HTML but couldn't figure out how to iron a shirt…

He'd also been neglecting his social skills, social proprieties. Not only did he neglect to formally greet me, he also didn't even say hello or anything, just asked me plainly, with zero eye contact, "Why should I give you a job?"

I wasn't prepared for that direct and pointed a question. I'd only recently finished school and had little interview experience.

But I rolled with the punches. I tugged my lips into a toothpaste ad of a smile and rattled off my part-time work experience, my internship, my current temping, plus I divulged that I was developing a website and had a passion for everything internet.

As I spoke, he appeared disinterested. He didn't look at me and stared out the window or checked his computer. Nor did he ask any follow-up questions.

Then he again spoke plainly, asked, "What sort of salary do you think I should pay you?"

I began to answer that "I feel as though I deserve…"

Once I said the word "deserve," his face went squirrely, then twisted into dismay. His chest heaved. He appeared genuinely angry. He swung his gaze, curled his upper lip, and, for the first time, he made eye contact, shooting a pair of gray stink eyes right at me, lasering me with a look of utter contempt.

"Wait, stop," he seethed, "'deserve…' where is this coming from? Why do you 'deserve' anything?!" He really stretched out that second syllable in "deserve" too.

Again, I was dumbfounded. I was 22 years old. I had just stepped foot into the "real world." I'd been under the impression, my whole short life, that anyone who works, contributes to society, has a job, he/she should be paid for that. What was

wrong with the notion, the expectation that one should "deserve" to be paid for work rendered? What had I said that triggered him?

But, before I countered his insensitive remarks with any outburst, any execration, I had a moment of prescience, almost as if I turned the page in a book. I remembered something I'd read online the night before. That a job interview is as much about you, the potential employee, as it is about the company, the potential employer...

So, that being the case, if this tangly-haired man was such an ass in the interview, then what type of boss would he be? And those dreary folks in the office, that receptionist who looked like she'd just been threatened at gunpoint, it was painfully obvious this was a terrible, toxic work environment. A dark and evil place. And I wanted no part of that.

I wasn't going to waste any more of my time, or his, and so I took the high road. I lifted to my feet, thanked him for his time. I didn't bother to shake his hand, and he extended no hand to me either. He didn't even respond, at all, as I rose to leave. He just rolled his gray eyes, sneered, then returned to poking at his computer.

Walking again through the office, and its Auschwitz vibes, I passed the downtrodden receptionist on my way out, and said to her, jokingly, in passing, "That guy is an asshole," to which her face lit up and she covered her mouth with her palm and giggled.

As I left, of course I was disappointed it didn't work out. But I also felt relieved. Relieved that I didn't take that job. Relieved that he was an asshole, from the start, and that I knew he was an asshole. Seriously, how much worse would it have been if I'd gotten the job *and then* discovered that?

(Besides, only a few months later, the website went bankrupt, died in the Nasdaq tech crash of '02...)

From that experience, however, I learned an important lesson. I learned to appreciate people who let you know, in whatever way, who they are and where they stand. Even if they're awful, at least I know and can operate accordingly.

An asshole who lets you know he/she's an asshole, is, in a counterintuitive, paradoxical way, actually a nice person.

A TALE OF TWO BROTHERS: THE LIBERAL AND THE CONSERVATIVE

For Sam Bankman-Fried

Stuart Monk hated family gatherings. Mostly because he couldn't stand having to visit his brother.

Stuart's younger brother, Sam, had gotten rich. Dirty, rotten, filthy stinking rich.

Not that Stuart was a slouch. He'd gone to Yale, had gone on to become a prominent figure at a conservative think tank. He'd even appeared on Fox News and wrote an op-ed piece for the *Washington Times*. But all that was dwarfed by his little brother, Sam, who, like their parents, was way on the other end of the political spectrum.

Of course part of Stuart was proud of his brother. How could he not be? Aside from politics, he rooted for his family.

In all honesty, however, it'd shocked him to see his brother become so wealthy. His little brother had been something of a loser, had mostly stayed ensconced in their parents' basement, sometimes working part-time, menial jobs but otherwise just playing video games, smoking pot and doing the stereotypical stoner thing.

But then Sam got lucky. Astronomically lucky. Lottery winner lucky. He'd been in a gaming chatroom and a buddy he'd met online had suggested Sam buy "Bitcoin," promising that the fledgling online currency was going to be huge.

Sam, admittedly high as the clouds in the sky, logged into his PayPal, bought $1000 worth of Bitcoin.

That $1000 initial investment eventually ballooned into 10 million dollars.

While money changes many for the worse, and heart-wrenching stories abound about lottery winners who lost everything, this dramatic shift in fortune actually changed Sam for the better. Radically so.

Suddenly Sam had confidence. He bought nice clothes and met new people. He reinvested and started a small private equity company quickly acquired by a larger private equity firm.

He got out of his parents' basement and bought a series of luxury condos, all of which he flipped at a profit. Then Sam bought his 16-bedroom estate overlooking the sea.

For the first time in his young life, too, Sam was dating regularly. Very regularly. He had striking beauties, aspiring models and actresses throwing themselves at him. His sprawling estate often looking like a modern-day Playboy mansion.

However, despite throwing parties to rival Puff Daddy's, and shocking to anyone who'd known him as a teen, Sam had gone sober. And not "California" sober, either, but real sober. Stone-cold sober. Marc Maron sober… Wouldn't even have a puff off a spliff or a sip of wine.

Money had become Sam's new drug. And he'd become a prolific investor, too, maintaining his leadership role at his private equity firm and profiting immensely in green tech and progressive, civic-minded start-ups.

Stuart, after overcoming his initial shock and disbelief of his brother's radical transformation, was eventually elated that he might have a potential ally. And a big potential donor.

Many liberals discovered themselves swinging far to the other end of the political spectrum once they got rich- once they saw how much lower their taxes could be under Republican administrations.

But not Sam. To Stuart's utter shock and consternation, Sam had gone the activist investor route and became *more* liberal, donated exclusively to leftist charities, and sent sardonic replies filled with goofy emojis to Stuart's requests for donations to his conservative think tank and causes.

The situation had Stuart increasingly annoyed. Here were free market, laissez-faire, Milton Friedman-esque economics making his brother a multi-millionaire, and yet his brother was shoveling buckets of cash to these socialist, communist causes. Causes that would only cause taxes to increase, all the while grabbing away guns and infringing upon personal freedoms.

Stuart just couldn't understand it, couldn't understand how Sam, with all that newly acquired wealth, *could* stay a liberal.

Stuart, for the life of him, sincerely couldn't understand why anyone (aside from those seeking welfare handouts) *would ever* want to be liberal. Particularly anyone rich.

Why? Just why? It'd keep Stuart up at night, twisting and turning…

Why would his brother throw money at crybaby, crybully leftist foundations, like charities set up to feed the homeless? As if the homeless couldn't feed themselves? Stuart figured the homeless were just lazy and that they wanted to be homeless. Why hand those lazy, stinky slobs free money? Why reward them for being blights upon society, pissing and shitting in the streets like stray dogs?

And those pro-abortion groups? Hellbent on killing babies? As if condoms weren't readily available? As if a life were a simple choice? To Stuart, it was revolting that Sam would act as their enabler.

And while Stuart was trying to raise money for the Police Benevolent Association, Sam donated one million dollars to a Marxist Black Lives Matter group and another $500,000 to ANTIFA. Sam gifted money to those thugs! Just who did Sam think was protecting him?

As if BLM thugs or ANTIFA would stop a home invasion or a mass shooting or show up to fight a house fire. To Stuart, it was unbelievable, utter madness…

Then there was the matter of respect. It was tough for Stuart to really acknowledge Sam's success. If anything, in Stuart's eyes, the guy was basically a lottery winner. He'd gotten lucky. No one knew at the time that Bitcoin would balloon in value, eventually fetch $68K per "coin."

Besides, Stuart had always been leery of crypto and likened it to the Dotcom or Tulip Bubbles of past decades and centuries. Moreover, Stuart detested Bitcoin's use in funding terrorist groups, drug dealers, prostitution and online gambling sites.

But there was no denying how Sam had profited. And there was no denying Bitcoin had changed Sam's life. What's more, there was no denying that this was a success story of the Chicago, George Stigler School of Economics that Stuart had always championed.

And thus, Stuart stirred in a strange mixture of resentment, jealousy, and admiration for his younger brother. While Stuart had long envisioned himself as the one residing in that mansion, at least if it wasn't him, it was his brother.

It was just too bad, though, that his brother was a liberal.

It was always a harrowing, humbling experience for Stuart, visiting his brother. The drive up to his brother's estate took about 70 minutes, 20 of that up a winding road to the peak of a high cliff. Atop the cliff sat the mansion.

Every time he entered the estate's tall steel gates, Stuart felt nauseous passing through the electrified fence encircling the estate. Stuart found the fence terribly, terribly hypocritical due to Sam's unyielding opposition to securing the US/Mexico border.

"Would 'no human is illegal' still apply to anyone climbing Sam's gates?" Stuart had always wanted to ask…

Steering his Ford F-150 Raptor through the mansion's grounds, Stuart would glance around and feel like he was getting gutted by a carving knife. Especially when he compared the mansion to his two-bedroom, 500-SQF condo.

Sam's house was like something off the cover of *Modern Homes* magazine. The contemporary style, blue glass-plated mansion nearly the mass of Stuart's entire condominium. The mansion's size and sleek architecture lending it the appearance of a fancy modern office complex rather than a residence.

To the mansion's side was a kidney-shaped pool and a circular hot tub. Neither of which Stuart would ever dip into. And in the estate's garage were a brand-new Lamborghini and a Tesla… Then on the garage's roof sat a green helipad…

To avoid traffic, or if he just didn't feel like driving his Lambo or Tesla, Sam sometimes summoned a helicopter taxi.

Stuart, burning inside, would often imagine that. Sam literally flying over the congested highway. Sam zipping right over that parking lot-like, rage-inducing, bumper-to-bumper mess. Stuart loved his job at the think tank but hated the commute. Sitting in his steel box, inching forward, tapping his brake pedal, moving in slow motion.

Even if Stuart loved his pickup truck, still, it was no Lamborghini or Tesla. And was certainly no helicopter…

Sharp pangs of envy paining him, Stuart would confront these thoughts with mantras, reminding himself of his struggle, what he would one day accomplish.

Stuart had big dreams. One day he'd move on from the think tank and be starting his own conservative news network, websites, and hosting podcasts and conservative radio shows, like his idol Rush Limbaugh. And one day, that'd be him flying in a helicopter, him up above everyone else.

One day he'll buy a mansion, too, he'd assure himself. A mansion atop a hill. And it'll be a far bigger and better mansion than his brother's.

RUNNING AWAY TO BHUTAN

The bus rattled along its morning route. The summer sun was already scorching, city streets hot as a frying pan.

Besides the interminable heatwave, the downtown, in summer, at least to ___, had always felt hotter. Something about being bordered by towering office buildings, skyscrapers trapping in, intensifying the heat.

The city bus jerked, then hung a left toward a busier intersection. Then the bus rattled again, axles squeaking… The bus's a/c straining, hissing in fits and stops...

___ crinkled his nose and scoffed at the spicy body odor stuck to his neighboring passenger. Silently, ___ pressed his eyes shut and wished he had superhero powers. That he could end the never-ending heatwave. Snap his fingers and set the city's temperature back to a perfect spring day… Or that he could at least make everyone else in the crowded bus just disappear…

Except for her of course. His secret crush. The petite blond in the aisle seat a few rows up. He'd been watching her for the last two months. But, lamentably, as usual, he lacked the courage to do anything about it.

In his mind he envisioned being a "Chad," confidently strutting up to her with the perfect pickup line. And he meant to do this. Several times. But just as he'd get the impulse, his throat would constrict, his tongue turning to sandpaper, his heart fluttering. Then he'd shrink, sink silently back into his bus seat, unable to rise… Again a prisoner to his perpetual paralysis of fear…

So he kept his head down. Literally. Like most everyone else, he remained attached to his phone, scrolling social media…

The bus's a/c was getting loud as a lawnmower. Whilst lessening the heat, it was feckless against the humidity, and a fat bead of cold sweat trickled down the small of ___'s back as he struggled to shift his weight in his hard, narrow bus seat.

Then the bus shook again, harder, rocking the passengers back and forth, almost like a roller coaster. This bus route had several potholes. And today they seemed worse than ever. Steadying himself in his seat, ___ felt a stab of queasiness, then a rush of blood went straight to his head.

On IG, scrolling through so many perfect pictures, ___ wondered if IG influencers ever rode buses. He'd never seen an influencer in person and wondered if they really were their pictures… And he wondered what they looked like without make-up and beauty filters… Or if the influencers were just as fake as politics and professional wrestling… Or if the influencers were just AI, bots designed for the algorithms and imitations… If they even existed…

"Phones are like us, they get old and they die," he could hear an elderly woman, a nun, saying to the young man seated beside her. The young man, in a black Raiders stocking cap, sat grimacing and shaking his phone violently.

The queasiness passed and ___ felt slightly better as he lifted his head up a notch to steal another glance… at her…

The blond entered his thoughts, daily, several times.

During the day he tried to guess everything about her. The sound of her voice… Her favorite food, favorite movie, favorite song, favorite season of the year... He'd see her tying her curly blond locks into a ponytail with the same baby blue scrunchies, so he imagined baby blue to be her favorite color…

At night, he'd fantasize about lying with her in a bed the size of a room. The two kissing and spooning. His hands cupping her upthrust breasts. Then his hands running down, to the warmth of her waist, over her hips. Then his hands hovering down, further, to her…

Then other times she'd enter his dreams. Her unclothed body bathed in an iridescent glow that swirled around her form like fog. And she'd follow and float over him, like an angel, close enough to see but too far to touch…

God, there were so many things he wanted to ask her and tell her. So many things. She just had these huge, electric blue eyes that were illuminated by everything he couldn't summon the courage to say.

Only two days ago, they'd sat next to each other. And he could smell the fruity scent of her shampoo. His knee had even lightly brushed up against her knee during the ride, and the friction had caused a jolt of electricity to surge through his body, made the hairs on the back of his neck prickle, gave him goosebumps.

That whole 20-minute ride, feeling her body heat next to him… had his thoughts racing, his heart leaping like a rabbit…

That whole 20-minute bus ride, he sweated. Clenched his balled fists. Ground his teeth... To ___, it was as if they were passengers aboard a small plane, flying through a violent thunderstorm.

Sitting beside her, that whole tortuous 20 minutes, he felt feckless. Trapped under ice. He wanted so badly to talk to her. He replayed all their imaginary conversations. He envisioned a hundred different things to say.

The recent heatwave, anything weather, that popular new show about autistic gay vampires. There were a thousand ways to break the ice.

But when the blond reached her stop, his dream girl lifted to her feet and slid by him, without any eye contact. And he just sat in his narrow bus seat with his lips in a tight line, his head hung low, his face to his phone.

Once again, he'd said nothing.

As usual, ____ watched the blond step off the bus at the stop before his. He knew she worked at the dentist's office with that tacky neon logo on its storefront.

____'d thought of going there for a tooth cleaning just to have an excuse to talk to her. But that would be too stalker-ish, he thought. She'd know he was the guy from the bus.

Then he thought of doing the "secret admirer" thing. Sending a big bouquet of flowers, along with a poem, to the blond's work. But he lamented that that would be even more stalker-ish…

Finally, the creaky old city bus arrived at ____'s stop. Through the grimy bus window, he glanced up at his office building. The colossal building, from afar, looked like a big silver fist thrust up at the blue sky.

A V of white swans was flying toward the egg-shaped lake in front of the office complex. The lake looked shallow and sickly and was bearded by unnaturally neon algae. ___ wasn't sure if the lake was real or manmade. And he couldn't understand why the swans were flocking there but he envied their freedom, ability to fly wherever, whenever.

Perhaps that'd be the superpower he'd choose. The ability to fly. ___ pondered that that could be even better than controlling the weather or making people disappear. The ability, the strength to lift into the air and soar, to fly whenever, wherever, like a swan…

Stepping off the bus was like walking into a wall of hot air. The strong sun setting upon him, with its wide orange crush…

His loafers heavy with heat, he padded forward, perspiring in the coiling cotton prison of his work attire. His every sweat gland screaming open. Then he shaded his eyes as a cloud of dust rose in the road ahead, whirling in the summer haze before it melted into shadows.

Then he let his arms hang at his sides, like broken wings. His dress shirt and slacks suddenly slicked. His reddening face wet with sweat.

Through the humidity he lurched and trudged on, walking at a faster pace than he should, shuffling toward another bus stop. This one for a shuttle up the hill, up to the silver fist. Then ___ stopped and stood under the misty shade of the bus stop canopy, hiding himself from the wrath of the buttery sun.

Then ___ thought more about the blond. How he might be in love with her. But he didn't even know her name. Was that possible? he wondered. Love at first sight?

Maybe it was. Maybe she was his soulmate. The person he should die with… He pictured them on an exotic honeymoon together. Somewhere thousands of miles away. Somewhere cold, snowy and mountainous. Somewhere where no one

could ever find them. Somewhere in the Himalayas. Somewhere… Somewhere like Bhutan…

The ugly heat, stifling, even in the canopy's shade, caused his skin to flush and creep and heavier beads of sweat broke out over his arms. Bigger beads of sweat then glistened, streaked down his forehead like raindrops along a window.

Lifting his gaze, he gaped at his reflection in the bus stop's canopy. He was clean-shaven. His complexion was pinkish but clear, albeit slightly weathered. There was a childish, babyface charm to his dimples. Puffing his chest out, his whole spirit was possessed with a determination to do better, to be better, to take the initiative… to be a winner…

Then he compared himself to the others in the bus line, wishing he were at least a head taller than everyone else…

Maybe instead of flying, the power to instantly grow tall, tall as an NBA basketball player, or even taller than an office building, that might be the superpower he'd choose.

He pictured himself and the blond, both tall as the Eifel Tower. He and the blond quitting their jobs. The two trampling over this godforsaken, furnace-hot city. He and the blond, trashing the city like a rock star wrecks a hotel room.

Him and the blond… kicking over office buildings, kicking the silver fist like a football… Him and the blond throwing skyscrapers like a petulant kid throws toys… Him and the blond moving mountains… Him and the blond, running hand in hand… Him and the blond so tall they clear thousands of miles with each stride… Him and the blond on their way to a honeymoon in Bhutan.

The employees moved in single file. Each with a look of dark emptiness as they trudged forward, lockstep in a pageantry of silent pain. The workers' lips pursed as they streamed into the cool mouth of the silver fist.

Everything and everyone at _____ Corp. was serious. Everything highly regimented. Rules strictly enforced. One of ___'s former coworkers had joked that the company was similar to Singapore.

"And Singapore is Disneyland with the death penalty."

The was a hierarchy of everything at the firm. Bathrooms, elevators, breakrooms, cafeterias assigned by departments, seniority. Upper-level executives and contract workers, like him, rarely met face to face.

The bosses, to ___, were like the IG influencers. They existed in another realm.

His loafers clicking on the linoleum floor, he shivered in the a/c's powerful blast. Cold shock proteins pulsated through his system, and he watched his feet fall forward, one after the other, and imagined his bosses, the corporate bodies, in their fancy suits.

He imagined the bosses as alternate lifeforms, or as parasites, mosquito-men, shape-shifting vampires, plastic straws for fangs… Aging men and women bathing in blood-filled bathtubs.

He saw the boardroom full of vampires sipping intravenous blood bags. Then more vampires in smoky chiaroscuro backrooms, their black blazers billowing like sails...

He saw the boss beasts giving rise to chemical reactions. The boss beast vampires in hidden tunnels, repairing to secret hideaways, cloud-shrouded volcanos in violent seas.

To ___, the bosses were the truest ___, for they cloistered in coffin-like cigarette boats, and hung neatly in catacombs. For they repaired to small land-like masses sticking up above dark waves… They simply didn't exist until they did… Just like death to most…

Waiting on the designated elevator, invisible ropes of an intense chill coiled around him, and a chemical smell crept into ___'s nostrils. ___ felt touched by watery tentacles, tendrils of an unknown force. His mouth snapped shut. Then he started to sense his calm silence careening toward a screaming panic.

But as __ realized his reflection in the steel, he relaxed as he saw the tranquility of his poker face. He knew his hands were steady, holding his briefcase. Then he thought of the blond, again, and felt better.

SCENE ON A TRAIN

The train was inching in toward the station.

In the carriage, there was a hum, a mechanical whir. A light buzz, not unlike an insect nearby, and a light din of chatter.

The carriage was full. It was first class, so there were men in business attire. There were the well-to-do of society, pink-faced middle-aged ladies in pricey clothes, and diplomats, and the indeterminate, those who could afford to travel luxuriously.

The normalcy was interrupted by a sudden pop, like a balloon bursting. The train grinding to a screeching halt.

A sweaty beige man in a black velvet jumpsuit jumped up from his reclined seat. His face was oily. He had what was left of his hair plastered to his head, which was oddly shaped. His skull pointy and slanted to the left, almost as if a chunk of it had been hacked off.

The man trembled and shouted "*homo technicus!*" and then began screaming, passionately, in a language that no one could comprehend. Then he pried open the window next to his seat and attempted to debouch from the train, but in the process got stuck in the window, bisected at the solar plexus, his upper body hanging outside the carriage, his thick arms dangling and flailing, spittle dribbling from his open mouth as he bellowed his acidic bursts of incomprehensible babble.

No one attempted to pull him back in. The train service workers, the ticket checkers, the attendants, simply stood and watched, transfixed, as he threw around his limbs, roared and pitched a fit.

A couple of minutes later, once the train started moving again, the flailing man suddenly went limp, his floppy body then sliding out the window, landing like a bag of rocks in the verdure.

PLAYING TAG WITH THE GHOST OF DWAYNE HASKINS

I knew there were more than vultures. I'd eaten bruised fruits. I'd long tangled with invisible barriers and punched my wall and kicked my door, argued with God more times than not.

It was again morning, and my hair was a hornet's nest, and I puckered, felt like an ass…

Yes, it was again morning. And it was a cold morning in Miami. The sunrise had thrown a pinkish hue over the horizon, and in the big beautiful clear sky flew a little man in a bird suit. Under his bird suit, I knew he was naked, and I wondered if he was the medicine man on IG who'd been kidnapping housecats for Hoodoo rituals. Or was he the stuttering prank-caller from YouTube…

The little person looked sketchy. Under his bird suit, I knew he had gashes, cuts along his stomach. There was a glint in his eyes that rubbed me the wrong way, though I envied his ability to fly. Think of the time, the cash he must save on plane tickets...

The little man in the bird suit crash-landed, bellyflopped on the highway. Then he was walking behind me, backwards... I'd also been walking backwards alongside the highway after playing tag with the ghost of Dwayne Haskins. I was en route to the beach to hit golf balls into the ocean.

I kicked off my flip-flops and spun to meet the birdman.

His face was uglier than Beetlejuice. His eyes were like two deep pools of septic tank sludge, giving every hint to what dwelled in his soul. This was Florida, after all, and he might be about to eat my face like a bath-salt snorting zombie.

But no. The birdman just said, "I am the show!" and flapped his wings and levitated, zipped away into the air, in an arc, a rainbow over the highway. I was overtaken with jealousy, enraged that everyone was flying but me.

It was then that memories of cocaine beaches rushed back to me. The hills to climb... I figured a cocaine mountain, tall as K2, was where the birdman lived.

I wanted to go there, find the mountain. I'd always appreciated the smell of cocaine…

I pulled out my penis, to hitchhike, then rode on the hood of an empty Tesla that'd been driving recklessly and had burst into fire shortly after it'd abruptly braked and rolled me off its hood, tumbling me into a mess of garbage bags bunched on a street corner.

Lifting to my feet, I plucked a fish spine from my mohawk, flicked it at the sky and began to run backwards. I was sunburnt, red as blood, and drenched in sweat. I was ready to relax. But instead of the laidback atmosphere I'd anticipated, the beach, the boardwalk were bedlam.

Enraged packs of obese social justice warriors were everywhere and were wheezing, trying to run. In between heaving breaths, they stopped and swung dead cats like nunchucks while screaming at the sky, threatening no one in particular.

Looking to my left, window washers were scaling a 100-foot gold penis that'd just erupted from the Atlantic Ocean, like a leviathan. The window washers themselves painted pure gold. The window washers were yelling at birdmen standing atop the penis's tip. The birdmen launching like fighter jets, flying off into the pink horizon.

Again, I was outraged. I couldn't find my golf club or my golf balls anywhere. And why was everyone flying but me?

Then I figured that if I snorted enough cocaine or bath salts, eventually I'd understand.

After all, this was Florida.

RHAPSODIZING THOUGHTS

GO ON! The thoughts were impaling me. Each thought sharp as a knife. Each thought taking on its own life, swirling and forming a pattern. Then each thought blended into the next. A sequence of patterns. An equation of imagination.

But it was then I realized my thoughts are mine. It was then I reined the critters in, gave them names, proper classification. Particular attention. A Catalogue. And I organized the arc of their direction.

The thoughts, traveling down my synapses. They break, open, yell and fade. Before I fought them. But now I've embraced them. I've learned their tilt. I've oracy to draw for the sides. I learned to love the short stick in the pudding.

It's this. It's how and when I let go. It's how I talk to myself. When I have a discussion with myself, I find my edge. I've learned to live inside the falling moments. And I've learned to exercise the nothing.

SLOW-MOVING HORROR SHOW

It's a slog. A slow-moving horror show. I think that's the best description I've heard yet. A slow-moving horror show. It's horrible, but it's not, like, plane crash horrible. It's not a wild, spectacular explosion like a plane crash.

It's slow. A creeping death. A crawling, unseen menace. Perhaps because of its invisibility, many deny it. Many require visual proof, evidence, smack dab in front of their eyes. If they don't have that, they simply won't believe it's real.

Those who can, without a doubt, affirm that it's real. They *know* it's real. They see it firsthand. They know what it is.

Just why do people have such a hard time accepting it? I can't understand. But I can understand. It's that invisibility. And anger, insults, threats and affirmations fail to register. Some people simply won't believe anything until it happens to them…

I pondered that today, passing by a man on the street. He appeared around 40 something. He wore no shirt. He was morbidly obese, his blubbery belly flopping and spilling over the stretched waist of his elephant pants. In another situation, he might be heading for an afternoon on the beach.

But no. He was walking down the street. A crowded city street. He was holding plastic bags in both hands. Both bags full of packaged foods. Potato chips, soda, and of course, Bud Light beer.

These days, sure, people are highly combustible. Nerves are frayed. But not him. His Zen of potato chips and Bud Light shouldn't be an instruction. But there's still a lesson.

SHANIA TWAIN HILLBILLY NIGHTMARE

Ever since the Floods, Irene's nightmares were worse than ever…

Shadowy figures on the horizon. Chasing her. Knifing through trellised shadows, craggy mountain tops, cold forests…

Irene didn't know exactly *who* the figures were. She just knew *they were after her*.

The offenders she styled as hillbillies, country hicks. Rednecks. Some had skulls visible under their skin. Some were shadows. The offenders often emerging from afar, from dark air, running roughshod, like wolves, through the forest…

Her menacing hicks in grease-stained overalls… Others berobed. In robes of red. Cold trickles and bloody noses peering from underneath the dark corona of their cowls…

… hicks lying in wait with crossed eyes, gaping mouths, cracked, dirty lips. Hicks whistlin' Dixie in the darkness…

But the hicks generally wouldn't scream or speak to Irene, aside from yeehawing. Most of the hicks only hissed like striking vipers… venomous silvery sparks leaping with their spit as the hicks' red robes went snapping with the wind.

The heaviest hicks stalking Irene under skies the color of a corpse...

… Hicks' breath fogging, blood streaking down the bumpkins' faces as the aggrieved hurdled toward her… running as bulls escaping the rodeo… the hicks' pulling penis petting-zoos like pits of snakes… outstretched hands clawing up from the ground…

The hicks' cold fingers crawling up and over Irene's limbs like cockroaches...

In these dreams she'd run. Barefoot. Through the forest. A hunted animal. Irene in Daisy Duke hotpants and a Hulkamania T-shirt. Freezing winds stealing her screams.

Her feet frozen, Irene ran wheezing, her wild bursts of breath becoming clouds of crystals sparkling silver-blue in the white wilderness… The forest floor opening in front of her as a treacherous carpet of rotting leaves. An icy surface crackling, crunching. A minefield.

In these dreams, the Shania Twain song "I'm Gonna Getcha Good" was often following Irene, playing from somewhere above. The twangy guitar melody, bass pounding in deep booms. The song maddening her as she panted and ran on dumb feet; menacing hicks' hisses sounding from all around, the cacophony of noise ever louder.

The hillbillies closing in.

Cold touching her skin, in these dreams Irene shook tremulously, puke caught in her throat… In these dreams, whichever way she ran, the rednecks were there, in blood-colored robes, filthy overalls soiled as used toilet paper; their whiskery, leathery faces like ghouls.

But the hicks then burnished into the back of Irene's eyes as she'd scream awake to silence. Her jaw then clenched with such force her teeth might shatter…

Tangled in her blankets, twisting this way and that, Irene would then clutch at her sheets like a parachute, waiting for lines of light, for night to melt into morning.

… waiting for her cornbread, for her hillbillies to hide like cockroaches from the sun.

Then there was the recent spate of truck dreams. Clattering along a crescent-shaped road in snow-capped mountains… Moonlit hills… Hoary peaks... Colossal cauliflower trees growing taller. A pale white haze deepening the distance.

The vehicle, a Ford F-150 pickup, was covered in Confederate flags, MAGA stickers and was driving itself, forcing on, fast as a demon. "I'm Gonna Getcha Good" again blaring… An Irene's hands handcuffed to the wheel... Disdain stirring, tremors of rage overtaking her as she gritted her teeth. But she let the vehicle fall forward. Kept quiet as a painting.

After all, politeness was her pedigree. Even in nightmares, Irene would remain a smiling woman. Wouldn't let the cracks show.

Even in nightmares, she knew a smile would be the perfect panacea. That a perfect smile could keep her teeth from falling out...

♪... Just like I should… ♪

… drew in a draft of wet air, felt her front teeth loosen along with the muscle spasms, then let the wheels rock on…

♪ ... if I can have you for life… ♪

The pickup shaking, rattling. A human shriek, then a "yeehaw!" coming from under the wheels... Irene would worry the truck's wheels might pop off and she'd be stranded in the cold mountains, alone. Alone and handcuffed to a heap of iron. Or chased into eternity by fat hicks piggybacking smaller hicks, mountain lions ridden by hillbillies… Hunted like a pig by Forrest Gump in a Bigfoot costume...

An Irene vanishing… a suicidal snowman jumping into a sweet tea jacuzzi.

As a city person, Irene had long been terrified of wide-open spaces, rural areas. Especially mountains. Mountains scared her most of all. The altitude. The dense thickets of trees, scrub, bushes. The invisibility. The likelihood of avalanches, forest fires, flash floods… The inevitability of hicks, hillbilly sightings…

Just what were mountains anyway? Chunks of the inner earth jutting up. The Earth's ugliest teeth… The Earth's vaginal dentata…

Mountain people especially horrified her. Scared her worse than circus clowns. Even before she watched the film *Deliverance*, but after that…

She pictured country folk as meth addicts, doomsday preppers, rapists, freaks who fucked their family members, tall obese men with scruffy ponytails, oil-stained overalls, mouthfuls of missing teeth. Mullet-headed monsters who smelled of body odor, ate roadkill, and watched NASCAR. People who belonged to hate groups. People who drove monster trucks with those big garish tires tall as boulders.

The sort of people who thought professional wrestling was real…

The news coverage of the Floods' devastation was unavoidable, and Irene's dreams kept sliding, becoming darker... In her darkest dreams, be they alone in the woods, or in a bumpy truck, she could feel the creep of a colder emptying... And the hillbillies were her culprits. Even if millions of hicks were amassed underwater, in watery graves… or be they running toward the tornado in the trailer park…

Her hicks were privy, collecting Irene's debts. Her every breath fueling their fury. Burning their Bibles. Her antagonists malicious, colder than shirtless men on *Cops.*

Irene's scariest dreams had come to feature hillbillies' tongues, their salivating, sloppy wet tongues licking over her naked body. The hillbillies airborne. In flight. Flying by her. Kamikaze. Fast as fruit bats. Hicks themselves slack-jawed and singing twisted, falsetto karaoke versions of Shania Twain songs to the sounds of distant farts and burps. The hillbillies aloft, tongues jutting out like madmen. The hillbillies licking Irene's face and neck as they flew past before repairing to bare, snowy branches… in distant trees, like the hands of skeletons clawing at the sky…

The rednecks hiding in tree branches, slapping their bellies, screaming snow off the mountaintop. The flying hicks barking like angry dogs yet remaining patient as vultures.

… or Irene alone, naked, lost in the woods. Freezing in blue skin. Seeing no hillbillies, but sensing and suspecting the mountain folk hunting, walking on all fours, peering from tunnels, abandoned mines. The hillbillies wiring banjo-bombs, setting beartraps, spitting watermelon seeds in her general direction.

"Not giving a fiddler's fuck."

In these dreams, smells were stronger, and Irene could smell alcohol, like a rubbing alcohol, and sense the hicks, in their hovels, sipping moonshine. She'd sense rednecks constructing outhouses with bed-of-nails toilet seats, torture chambers for urbanites...

Then there were her recent dreams of hillbilly sister-wives, daughter-wives, the hillbilly witches... Irene was terrified of them too… The vile, fat, bubble figures pointing at her from afar, hitchhiking via middle finger… The witches creeping and crawling on the side of the road, slow as the tides…

Irene hated the witches' round faces, their sickly ashen hues, their ragged clothes. The witches dressed in tattered robes of red. She knew the hillbilly witches were onto her, floating like ghosts up in the mountains… Woods witches uglier than Marjorie Taylor Greene… … with broken teeth and blotched faces, close-set eyes and weak chins… Cunts stealing the cotton from clouds…

Irene knew the hillbilly witches as total fucking terrorists, feeding on shadows. The redneck witches omnipotent as her every fear.

♪… Don't try to run…♪

Irene was sleeping fitfully and waking at 3:30 a.m., pretty much every night, her mouth dry with dread. Then she'd jump out of bed, pad over to the bathroom, her slippers whispering across the marble floors as she squinted her eyes.

In the pink of her bathroom, she'd open the lights to spot her reflection, and she'd see her face puffy with sleep, her hair like a bird's nest, her age showing, her frown lines deepening, crow's feet digging into her face like claws.

Irene wanted to blame the light. And she knew that she should stop watching the news, the Floods, the live feeds. But she just couldn't stop.

… Irene sometimes wished she could hear her father and mother's voices. She wanted to remember what they sounded like, as she heard them, not as she remembered them, not as they sounded on tape…

… Her fleeting images…. Father and his gayness… Her gay father and his manicured hands, his Audemars wristwatch… His anthrax evenings, glory hole at the ballet…

Her mother, the couch creature believing in Coca-Cola, commemorative plates, spoons from each state… Her mother never ever stressing the initial syllable in "insurance" or "guitar."

… Her mother's trembling phobia of elevators... Her mother walking up and down 15 flights of stairs…

The family once cloistered under a chandelier that looked like a billion bits of broken glass…

So much of Irene's life was spent in the air. In the sky. In her high-rise apartment. At her job. In a spiraling office tower, with its silver trim and gold-tinted, glass-plated windows. Its ergonomic furniture and sweeping city, park views.

Sitting in the office, under butter-soft fluorescent lights, she'd gaze out at the window washers dangling from adjacent skyscrapers. The window washers held

by harnesses and ropes, the men and women pushing their squeegees, sweeping scrubbers over windows.

And she'd watch them as they descended in their boxes, as they were hanging outside her window. And she'd wonder what that would be like, to be a window washer. To be in a dangling box, high in the sky, scrubbing muck off a window.

"Scrubbing a toilet is a human experience… But scrubbing a window? Even at the Burj Khalifa?"

Most of the window washers kept their eyes focused on their work. But one, a youngish, handsome man, with gold-colored skin, wavy, slicked-back black hair and a cute, crooked smile would sometimes glance at her, his wry smirk growing rounder.

Their eyes would meet like lasers. But coyly she'd look away. Then he'd look away, return to his work, and she'd resume watching him, watching his rippling biceps, his strong jawline as he'd push his brush, misting her windows with suds.

Despite his being so handsome, there seemed a desperate fury to him, a saturnine tilt to his big brown eyes, she sensed, as if his eyes were two bottomless pits of pain. Yet his boyish face retained a certain purity, an innocence, like a puppy dog's…

"Hit's a' hunger," a hillbilly witch in the passenger seat whispered. It was a terrible telepathy. The woods witch, with a face like a pile of shit, was opening the Ford pickup's door as the truck sped up a twisting, snow-carpeted mountain road. The witch then sprang from the moving vehicle, and her whole wide body shattered like a glass bottle as she bellyflopped onto the road, then disintegrated, white as ice, molting in with the snow.

The Shania Twain song, "Man! I Feel Like A Woman!" started playing loudly, the bass bumping, blood dribbling from an Irene's ears…

Then another pickup truck dream. And Irene was the truck. Her hands and feet were wheels. A cell phone shoved up her ass. And Irene was on all fours, like a mechanical dog, careening downhill, on a curvy dirt road where she passed by another hillbilly witch as the Shania Twain song “Up!” sounded from Irene’s ass.

The witch was by the side of the mountain road, the road leading down to a diorama of a cookout at Capitol Hill… The redneck witch in a Shania Twain mask, the redneck witch pointing a big black dildo, carjacking an ambulance driven by Theo Von… The ambulance’s sirens silently flashing blue and red…

♪... I’m goin’ up… ♪

Then Irene was not a truck. She was outside of any truck, in another white wilderness, under a night like a veil of dark silk… An Irene in a chicken suit, standing opposite a chunky, naked hillbilly witch, atop a frozen hilltop.

The witch’s teeth were black as bugs, and there was a curious gray misting creeping forth as banjo music in the background was battling the hiss of an icy wind.

Then the mist changed colors and became a great green fire that licked over and swallowed the naked witch, then floated like a spongey fog. The mist funneling, eating into Irene’s mouth, burning like a scalding hot tea down her throat before squeezing her lungs as if they were balloons to be popped.

Gasping for air, Irene awoke to a pool of sweat, and lay comatose, awake but asleep until sunrise, wet and heavy under her slicked sheets.

The handsome young window washer began to appear in Irene’s dreams. The window washer and she in the Ford F-150. The pickup truck on autopilot, driving itself, as she and the window washer set their feet on the dashboard, played and poked at their bare hands, pretending they had phones, pretending they were palm readers.

Whenever the window washer was in the truck, it was peaceful and holy. She'd feel a comfort, a warmth, like being wrapped in a heavy blanket on a cold winter night. "From This Moment On" would be playing from the pickup's speakers…

But there were other occasions when the window washer was air, and another man would appear in the vehicle. Another berobed hick. A bear of a man. A man with a shaved head and a long beard, a beard as long as a Taliban fighter's. But this bear's beard was red, fiery red, as if a burning bush were floating over his face.

Once the bearded bear would appear in the car, "That Don't Impress Me Much" would start playing… Irene's front teeth loosening... The truck turning cold as a freezer. Irene drugged with pain and misery; her tongue heavy as a brick. Irene gasping for air as if choking on a chunk of ice.

The pickup then speeding up and driving off a mountainside... Plunging into a lake of blood… The music abruptly stopping, the needle scratching off the record as walls of dark red water cracked open the pickup truck's windows, flooded the vehicle. The red bear swinging his head toward her, crying out through his huge beard, "YEEHAW!!" as all the life in Irene's body froze in her veins…

Irene's next series of dreams were soundless and centered around heights. Jumping off tall buildings. Jumping off mountains. Jumping off bridges.

The jump. Then the falling. Feeling the purity of gravity. The pull, the suction of the force. But, every time, she'd wake up right before hitting the ground or water or pavement. Right before impact, she'd jolt awake, her mouth bone dry, her throat clenched. Sweat sopping the sheets…

Enough was enough. So Irene decided not to sleep anymore. Sleep had gone from a burden to a torture. The truck dreams, the flying hicks, the jumping dreams, the

bearded bear in the car, the woods witches, the hillbillies building torture chambers. There would be no more of this.

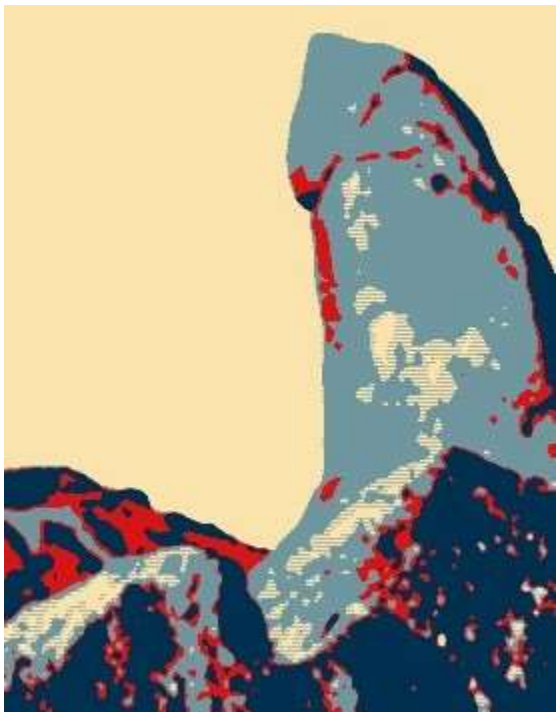
No more Flood feeds either. She was done with it all.

Once again, an Irene had flown in a squirrel suit to work, listening to Shania Twain's "You're Still the One," on repeat, via telepathy.

It was a hideous morning. The wind heavy and wet, pregnant with frosty rain. The sky sloped, covered in sinking clouds, gray as a rat.

Outside the towering office building's front entrance, it was a mob scene. A window washer had fallen to his death. His body, facedown, was in a starfish pose, the fresh corpse lying in a spreading pool of purply blood…

As Irene descended, she ignored the jumbotron displaying the latest Flood devastation. And Irene didn't want to recognize the body, yet she shivered as a wave of sorrow washed over her. Then she noticed the medics, one of them unusually tall, the other with golden skin.



KANYE AND Q AT BROKEN CONDOM BEACH

Broken Condom Beach… A tropical paradise...

For a second, I awed at the island's scenery. The sky above was like a big box of blue. The crystal-clear sea appeared calm, free of sharks. The whole place was perfect and pretty as a postcard.

Then I pushed forward. The sun bathing me in its golden rays. Swaying coconut palms powering my mojo. The afternoon was hot and the air soupy but not

stifling. Then a pleasant scent of campfire in the distance began tickling at my nose.

“Left, right, left. Left, right, left,” cried out Kanye.

For four months, on my fortune teller’s advice, I’d been following Kanye from 7-Eleven to 7-Eleven. For four months, I’d been fecklessly hunting for the QR code to disarm the ticking timebomb in my chest.

But today would be different. And boisterously, I flung my feet forth, in my sandals, digging my toes into the soft, warm white sands.

Kanye grunted, ran 10 paces, like a cricket bowler, got right up to the end of the sea and flung his phone into the water as we arrived at the rocks.

Here the beach had hardened, and the sand had petered out. Here the sands ended in a long path of large rock formations. Some of the rockery jagged. Some circular and smooth.

It was so unlike Stonehenge.

“Can’t get blood from a stone, see,” chortled Q. Q’s squawky voice reminded me of a 1930s movie gangster, and his face was like a lightbulb, his tunic the color of money… The same color as Kanye’s wrestler’s singlet…

We began to climb the rocks. One was shaped like a penis, another as a vagina. The two unique rock formations in close proximity to one another.

“Oumuamua! Yes…” called out Q as he patted the penis rock.

The rocks remained mostly the same height and were tall enough to climb, jump between. Kanye was skipping between them, with a breezy ease, like hopscotch. Here and there treacherous gaps cut between the rocks.

“Just one slip, and a leg, an ankle could snap. Easy as stepping on a twig,” warned Q, bringing a brief sense of solemnity. But the uncomfortable moment quickly passed, and we were again off jumping and scampering like a pack of happy squirrels.

Kanye was leading the way. He was in his element. There were no stops in his progress. Q and I went slower, were feeling like tortoises. “Slow and steady,”

whimpered Q, his bulbous brow slicked with sweat. Then a cottony cloud disintegrated and the sun bore down.

“The greatest heat lamp ever,” murmured Q. His face becoming gray with fatigue. Then he stopped in his tracks and squatted and hung his head over the lip of a low incline-shaped rocky mass. Peering below, he wowed at the translucence of the sea, saying how it was clear as coconut water. Then he cringed at the seaweed, scattered formations of algae-covered rocks lining the seafloor.

“This sea’s an open mouth. A mouth missing most of its teeth,” muttered Q, ruefully.

The sea couldn’t have been more than a meter deep, but the coastline had risen into a high cliff hanging overhead, nothing but jungle behind it. Then I looked to my right and then to my left and could see only rocks. Massive clumps of cable car-sized rocks. Infinite, uneven piles of purply, gray, brown and black rocks. The rocks stretching out as far as the eye could see.

That distant scent of campfire was gone, too, replaced by only an omnipresence of salty sea air. There was no easy way back. Or forward. And not a single 7-Eleven was in sight.

But Kanye wasn’t fazed.

“It’s a small titty-shaped island. Eventually we’ll find our way,” was his reasoning. But the Q-ster wasn’t convinced. He had the look of a man who’d just found out his wife was cheating on him. Still though, he wouldn’t be a crybully and he pressed forward, stringing behind us, wheezing and panting in shuddery breaths.

Further on we went. Q, stuttering and gasping, kept pleading to turn back, but Kayne kept surging forward, jumping and moving like Super Mario.

Despite his display of an almost inconceivable agility, eventually Kanye’s movements started slowing. A large scrape on his left leg was oozing blood. The side of his singlet torn. But he pressed on, flung himself forward.

Q was really slowing down by this point. His tunic hung in shreds off his shoulders; one of his sandals was missing; and both his knees were grazed, blood streaking down his shins. His hands had been bruised and bloodied, the flesh ripped. Yet his face retained a certain synthetic innocence.

“Another case study in false flags, crisis acting!” bellowed Q, in a strained voice. The coherence of his syllabication was lessening. And he stopped again and stood rooted to the top of a silver rock that was shaped like an uneven capital O.

Kanye and I both knew it. Q wanted to slam the door and hide in his bedroom. Click his heels and be back in Kansas. But the rocks were inanimate. And the sea had its own hunger, priorities and prerogatives.

Shadows puddled at his heels and collected under Q as he stood silent and sour. In his sulking, he began blanching, giving him the appearance of a pasty ghost.

“So you’re just going to stand there and be miserable?! Quit like a coward? You’ll never break the internet!” shouted Kanye, his voice edged with annoyance, his eyes aflame with antipathy.

Q remained frozen in his halo of sullen insolence. He was choking back sobs and snorts and was ranting about Taylor Swift armed with a weed whacker chasing the dwarf from Game of Thrones through Central Park. Then about Anthony Weiner, in a bearskin, doing push-ups after chewing on Hillary Clinton’s toes…

My forehead was flayed; my skin peeling in the sun’s yellowy blast. The timebomb in my chest ticked faster. There was no consensus. We were lost. No GPS. No 7-Eleven. No nothing. The scene was turning into a horror show. Kanye, sensing the mood, pressed his palms together, dropped to his knees and cried out to God…

Then I spotted a canoe in the distance. In it sat a Hindu god, with 8 arms, the god holding multiple phones, snapping several selfies. Then I noticed that the canoe was near a small alcove, an inlet of beach bisecting the craggy coast.

In the inlet sat a 7-Eleven. Its exterior yellow and flare shaped. The building looking perfect as plastic.

Unfortunately, though, the rocks had grown taller, too tall to climb. The only way to the 7-Eleven would be to dive into the sea, swim around the rocks and crawl onto the beach.

I shot Q a tilted head, curious-puppy look, but in my heart, I knew he was a goner.

“Just go! Go on without me! Save yourselves!” Q screamed, his voice cracking. Then he started emitting shrill breathless sounds as he squatted and hunched

forward. Then he began rhythmically slapping at the rock like a tribesman beating a drum…

“Imma let you finish,” said Kanye, deadpan. As he rose to his feet his mouth started curling at the corners, slowly grew into a psychopath’s smile.

In the lingering radiance of the tropical sun I could see diamonds of spit sparkling on his teeth.

Then my lower jaw fell to my chest as Kanye hissed like an angry cat and leapt off the rocks, plunging and piledriving into the water, and I shrieked and clapped my hands to my cheeks as Kanye snapped a leg on a jagged rock.

Ribbons of blood curled up and pooled into a dark red puddle encircling Kanye as he flailed and splashed. It was almost as if he were being eaten alive and pulled underwater by piranhas, sharks or cannibal mermaids as the last of his outstretched arm sank below the surface of the sea...

The sun suddenly felt 10 degrees hotter. The salty air balmier. Beads of sweat slid into my eyes; my skin scorching and stinging like I’d been set upon by a swarm of bees.

“Huh-huh, that sea is scarier than Lawrence Taylor. Better put some respect on it.” I heard Stephen A. Smith shout. Swinging my gaze, I saw Stephen A perched atop a nearby coconut palm. Faint streaks of sunlit clouds gleaming behind him. The sportscaster bug-eyed, laughing hysterically and puffing on a penis-shaped pot pipe, his left arm in a sling.

Then Stephen A grew dragon’s wings and flew up and off into the luminous sky. The sportscaster, in a blaze of weed smoke, coughing and cackling in his perfectly creased three-piece suit, the suit the color of money...

I swung my gaze back to Q and saw him standing atop a rock. Q was in a Jesus Christ pose, aging in reverse, quickly shapeshifting from a middle-aged man to a young man, to a boy, to a baby, and then to a broken condom.

Looking back to the sea, I saw no trace of Kanye, no blood, no bloated body floating in the water.

“Habeas Corpus,” I imagined Q would say…

So it'd come to this. Sink or swim. But I wasn't prepared to swim. I had a ticking timebomb in my chest. I was wearing a Bluetooth headset. I was listening to the Stephen A. Smith podcast. I was terrified of sharks. And I'd recently learned that both Kanye and my fortune teller had blocked me on Twitter.

But I knew what I had to do. I had to get to that 7-Eleven as soon as I could. I knew no one was coming. I knew my chest would explode or a rainstorm or high tides or breaking waves might wash me out to sea. I knew what I had to do.

Cautiously, I crab-walked and crept down the rocks. My hands scraped along the rocks' rough, sandpaper-like surfaces and my palms and fingers became torn, bleeding and numb. Then my back began to throb. But I pushed forward, and I slid myself down further, carefully, stepping into the salty seawater like a crane. Fortunately I found the sea only chest deep. The water warm and calm as an evening bath.

Walking in slow motion through the sea made me feel so unlike Jesus. Then the sharp edges of the stony seafloor stabbed my feet, sliced through my sandals. My feet felt like slashed tires, but I kept muscling forward, kept pushing on.

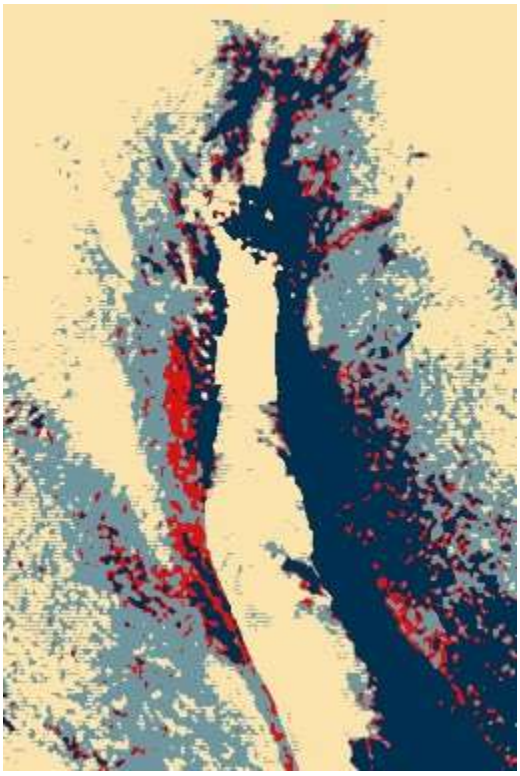
My hands were bleeding heavily, leaving red trails in the clear waters. My whole body felt like fish food. Then my back seized up as I doggy-paddled as every part of my body started screaming, screaming, SCREAMING!!!

I tried to yell for help to the Hindu god in the canoe but all that came out was a pathetic whistle of air. My mouth was so full of salt.

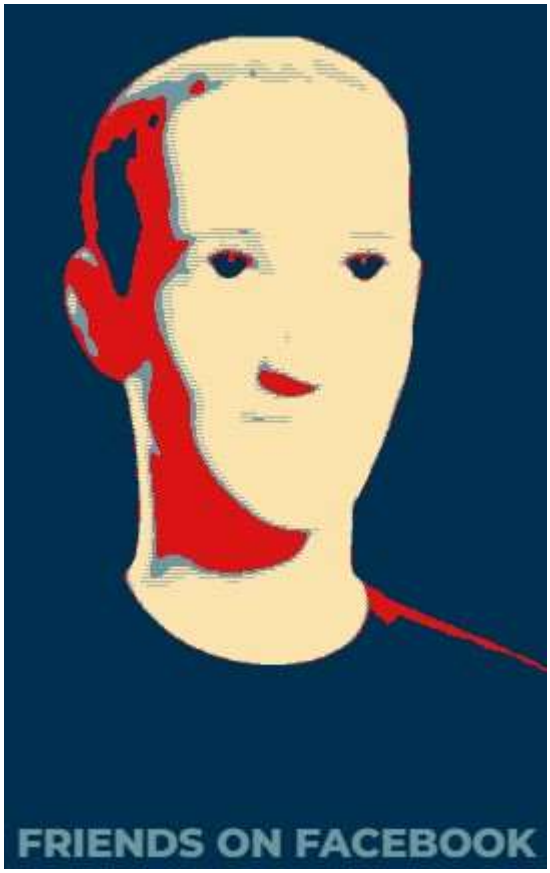
Swimming like Old Yeller, I set my narrowed eyes on that short stretch of white sands. And I marveled at the almost supernatural image of the yellow, plasticine 7-Eleven standing in its center. The 7-Eleven appearing like an oasis in the desert.

I would find gravity. I would survive. I would swim to that shore. I would find a new fortune teller. I would walk into that 7-Eleven. Even if soaking wet.

I would find the QR code. I would disarm the bomb in my chest. Heck, I might even drink a coconut water.



FRIENDS ON FACEBOOK



Mark and I had been coworkers in the same department for over a year. We'd sit at the same tables during lunch, and once or twice, we went with other office workers for happy hour beers.

But we remained acquaintances. The sort you'd see on the street or hallway and nod to or wave at, but not the type you'd stop to talk with…

I'm not even sure who added who, but once we became friends on Facebook, I started learning way more about him.

I guess our algorithms overlapped…

Soon enough my feed was featuring his daily posts, and I learned his favorite food was pepperoni pizza. Then I discovered his favorite band was Arcade Fire.

Then I found out his taste in film. His penchant for 1980s flicks. And I'd initially chuckled as he declared, unironically, too, it appeared, that Police Academy was a cinematic masterpiece.

But upon further thought, I silently concurred.

Then, as time went on, I got to see Mark's different moods on different days and was impressed by his ability to not let trivial annoyances like the broken copier or slow Wi-Fi affect him. How he'd use humor, funny memes to counteract office chaos…

Am I a voyeur? Perhaps I am. But not intentionally. I'd never set out to follow him or wondered what he was doing or checked his page.

It was just… day after day… his posts kept magically popping up in my feed, and, for whatever reason, I kept reading them.

Perhaps it was due to his posts' refreshing banality. Or his easygoing, Midwestern manner. He never once posted obnoxious stuff. He never ranted in ALL CAPS about Trump. He wasn't spamming or selling anything. And he was only posting once, perhaps twice a day.

So I kept passively reading. Even after he left the company.

Normally I never bother to block or delete anyone without reason, like spam or too much finger-pointing politics, but sometimes I'll notice former coworkers delete me.

One former coworker had said that he prefers keeping his social media friends circle small, only people he has regular contact with, and when we lost touch after he left the firm, then subsequently deleted me, I understood.

But Mark never deleted me, and almost as if I were a regular, semi-interested watcher of a reality TV show, I kept seeing these random snapshots of his life.

Sometimes I'd see his posts daily. Sometimes once or twice a week. And I went on seeing them… For the next five years…

I saw him marry his girlfriend. Saw his new car. His new house. His new job. Then his next new job.

I saw pictures of his newborn daughter. Then saw his daughter take her first steps.

I never commented on a single post he'd made. Yet I kept receiving his posts in my feed. Right up to until his daughter's first day in kindergarten.

It was around this time that his father died.

I'd known Mark was quite close to his Pops. He'd posted pictures of them together, always out fishing, and he'd shared his dad's silly aphorisms.

I knew he'd take his father's death hard, and part of me wanted to reach out, send condolences. But we'd not spoken in almost six years. And we had never really known each other well. So what could I even say?

His next few posts came at longer and longer intervals. And he'd look rough, too, dark circles under his eyes, his face looking puffy, his skin terrible, oily and reddish.

The posts were of him faking a smile, snapping a selfie in the same, white-walled breakroom at his firm. The posts didn't contain a word of text, only his unsettling, strained smiles.

Then the posts stopped. I checked to see if he'd deleted me, but he hadn't. Legitimately, I started to worry. Worried he'd gone too ham on the alcohol. I did recall him once saying that he limited his alcohol intake because he didn't want to "wind up like his brother," whatever that meant, and I recalled too that he'd never posted any pictures of his brother.

Another month went by. Still, no posts. Not that I knew him well enough to be seriously, drastically concerned, but it was nagging at me. I had to know, just, something…

So I approached another guy in our department, a shifty-eyed fellow, who was rumored to be ex-CIA… He was a musclebound type with a shaved head and a cauliflower ear. The type who didn't talk to a lot of people…

Someone had told me he was a Libertarian… He was one of the few who'd been at the firm longer than me…

Mark had sat in the cubicle next to the Libertarian, and they'd been chatting when we were out for beers, so I figured it was worth asking about.

So I went sauntering by the Libertarian's cubicle, after lunch, and popped my head in and asked if he remembered or had heard from Mark. The Libertarian then swiveled in his seat, but kept his eyes on his desktop and said, softly, "He's gone."

"Gone?" I asked, straightening my tie.

"Gone, man," and he'd said this louder but without a trace of emotion.

And I think I knew exactly what he meant.

DEFUND THE POLICE!!!

Ray's arms extended forward, as if he were typing on a computer. His hands were cuffed to the table. His shoes and socks had been confiscated, on the grounds of safety, and so his feet were bare, sticky on the cold floor. Silently he sat brooding, struggling to slump into the bench's backrest.

Orbiting Ray was Officer Apples.

Officer Apples was in a tizzy. His bloodshot eyes were widening, ready to jump off his face. The veins on his neck popped and cabled. The twin tufts of salt and pepper hair hugging his head moved and flopped like a flightless bird's wings.

Clucks were sounding from the corners of the officer's mouth. It was part of his procedural method, this morbid stridulation. And the sharpness of the air, the vacuity in Ray's gaze only egged it on…

Officer Apples hammered at the bone-gray table with his nightstick, finding an almost tribal rhythm. The officer repeatedly rapping and whacking the table like he was after a mole. Despite the thickness of the A/C's frigid blast, beads of perspiration dotted the officer's furrowed brow and rivulets of sweat streamed over his ruddy skin; his cream-white dress shirt becoming mottled by damp spots.

Officer Apples jerked his neck from side to side, grinned, and then let his smile die, spasming with anger as he resumed shouting accusations, threats of long-term imprisonment and jailhouse justice, and with each blast of invective, he looked less like a cop and more like a drill sergeant drunk on rage.

Clank Clank Clank!!! The whaps at the table picked up steam. Beating closer… Rising in volume, intensity…

"I'm telling you, I ain't do nothing!" Ray pleaded, his panicked voice straining, upping an octave. Ray's body was rigid as a rail, and he eyed the nightstick as if it were a poisonous snake and quickly began straightening his posture.

Officer Apples drummed at the table again.

Harder.

CLANK! … CLANK! … CLANK! …

Each blow coming closer and closer to Ray's chained hands, which were quivering, rattling the steel rings.

Officer Apples relented. Stood back, observed the pitiful youth. Then he giggled, enjoyed a Jekyll and Hyde moment, and figured he'd allow the suspect a chance. Besides, Officer Orange wasn't around today to play good cop. This meant Officer Apples had carte blanche to treat the suspect however he saw fit, but also meant he had to play the dual roles.

"Ray Ray, Ray Ray…" Officer Apples figured that no one called Ray "Ray Ray," but he wanted to do it anyway, just to prickle the youth, goad him off guard. The cop went on, "You're probably not a bad kid," the officer said, in a syrupy tone, before pausing, and raising his voice, "but we have evidence," and with that, Officer Apples reached across the table, and with the precision of a card dealer, the officer flipped over and slid Ray a black and white printout of a video frame.

The picture was a blurry image of a young man, in a department store, stuffing boxes of Yeezy shoes into a duffel bag.

Ray refused to lay eyes on the evidence, and just pursed his lips, trained his gaze on the wall, remained intransigent.

"Come on, Ray Ray," Officer Apples continued, nodding at the picture, softening his tone again, "let's make this easier. Just confess to your part in the flash mobs, give me a few names, and we can work out… an arrangement… something… mutually beneficial."

Ray craned his neck and sat in strained silence. His upper lip curling like a wave as he stared at the emptiness of the interrogation room's walls. The walls whiter than the face of the moon.

Officer Apples scoffed, snorted at Ray, and the copper continued to be astounded by the arrogance, sheer ignorance of today's kids. Didn't they know the police can access Instagram and TikTok?

Nowadays, with so many cases, including this one, cops could sit in the comfort of an air-conditioned office, scrolling through gang members' social media, and the cops could download all the kids' incriminating pictures, the kids toting guns, throwing up gang signs, the young thugs using and selling drugs, fanning themselves with fistfuls of cash, preening and pointing at stolen booty.

Some of these miscreants even uploaded their own ridiculous rap songs and videos, confessing to and bragging about murders, crimes they committed.

Getting warrants had never been easier…

2

Every once in a while, in the deepest, darkest hours of night, Officer Apples would lie awake, pontificating, his mind a maze of racing thoughts…

Like a lot of cops, he came from a cop family. His dad, uncle, older brother, aunt, cousin, all cops. And that was all he ever wanted to be. A policeman.

As a small child he'd played with toy cop cars and had a huge poster of Dirty Harry on his bedroom wall, right next to his Reagan-Bush '84 campaign banner.

And while other kids dreamed of being baseball players or astronauts, he dreamed of donning the blue uniform, saving damsels in distress, going on high-speed chases… having shootouts with bank robbers… putting bad guys behind bars…

Officer Apples had loved everything about the police and loved any book, magazine, cartoon, comic, TV show, or movie about cops. He even loved those goofy *Police Academy* flicks. He'd pictured his life being something like that, like a Hollywood movie, like something between *Heat* and *Police Academy.*

But reality had been so much different. On most days, he felt more like a nanny with a gun, a babysitter, or a bouncer more than anything else.

Much of his work had consisted of drudgery like dragging an irate drunk from a bar, breaking up screaming match domestic disputes, assisting firefighters to rescue a housecat from a tall tree, or helping an old lady pack groceries into her car. Then there were the mountains of paperwork, the bureaucracy, useless meetings…

Then there was this. These kids…

Officer Apples had hated going after stupid teenagers for shoplifting, spray-painting… Having to break up house parties was especially brutal… At first, it'd make him feel so old, banging on doors, turning off loud music, facing down pissed-off, booing crowds full of angry faces.

Sometimes the kids were terrified, too, looking like they saw a ghost. Kids scattering in every direction, simply at the mere sight of the police. Kids dashing off into residential streets, running fast as athletes at a track meet.

As time went on, though, so much of that… just… bothered him less and less.

But what Officer Apples struggled to accept was the recent increase in hostility toward the police. The slander. The lack of respect from society. Most all he and his partner got these days were stink-eyed, dirty looks and passive aggression.

Not to mention the ever-increasing number of insta-lawyers, amateur journalists, and brazenly cantankerous fucks, assholes talking back, making George Floyd quips, brandishing smartphones, and pointing fingers, flapping their gums, lecturing cops on how to do their jobs, and blabbering about horseshit like "defund the police."

Of course there'd always been entitled assholes being plain belligerent, yelling stupid crap about how "MY TAXES are PAYING YOUR salary!" But somehow, in the 2020s, it was different… worse…

So this is what we get for putting our lives on the line, every day, to serve and protect?

Officer Apples remembered the days following 9/11, the outpouring of respect for police, first responders… Random people wearing NYPD baseball caps… *What happened to that?*

Nowadays it often felt to him as if his badge had become a talisman of illegitimacy and ignominy, a haunted vessel, a magnet of hatred. A festering wound ready for a sprinkling of salt.

It's not like they ever walked in a cop's shoes. Let's see the crybabies on social media and the protestors work, for a single day, as a police officer. Let's see who they call when a homicidal shitbag runs into a high school and shoots up the place. See them cry about "canceling" the cops, see their whiny "defund the police" bullshit then.

Few could ever truly understand what police underwent, Officer Apples would ruminate. *The daily dangers. The mortal dangers. The strain on marriages and relationships. The misanthropy and lost faith in humanity… Always looking at everyone as a suspect. Always expecting the worst…*

The things cops see, no one should ever have to see… An officer Apples served with had been a first responder at Sandy Hook, witnessed the aftermath and inspected the crime scene… Hasn't had a decent sleep in nearly ten years…

The graveyard shifts… Late-night traffic stops. Approaching a shady vehicle with tinted windows. Never knowing what might happen, never knowing who might have a weapon… And a reason to use it…

People, everyday people, whether it's a working stiff in an office, a factory, or a shop, none of them, none of them could know. None of them could ever truly understand what law enforcement endure…

Here and there Officer Apples thought about switching jobs. Doing something else.

But what? He had no idea.

He was nearing 50. He had a mortgage, a wife, a kid, a thickening waistline and an assortment of worsening middle-age maladies like back pain, bruxism, IBS, and acid reflux… At his station in life, he couldn't just up and do something else. He wasn't going to learn to "code," or learn "crypto." Whatever any of that crap even meant.

More and more, the only enjoyment, pride in his job Officer Apples took was at least he was ridding the streets of a few losers, illegal immigrants, junkies, and young punks.

Officer Apples had largely grown to hate today's youth.

Teenage boys. Hip hop punks most of all.

Officer Apples detested rap music. The way it sounds. Its negative influence on society. Its glorification of criminality.

He hated how hip-hop assholes talked, their slang, their degradation of the English language. He hated their breakdancing, their graffiti, their face tattoos, their weird haircuts, and the hip-hop kids' shiny, bright and tacky clothes that were always either too tight or too loose, and he hated how they'd walk around with their pants hanging to their knees, with their underwear and butts all loose and hanging out.

The fucking kids look like baboons.

Teenage hip hop punks, they always acted so cool and tough. They'd talk back, mutter insults under their breath, puff out their chest in front of their "boys." But once lots of these little hip-hopping heathens were alone in custody, and locked up in a windowless, cold cell, everything shifted to a simpering "yes, sir," and "no, sir."

Some of them even cried, cowered like little wounded beasts, and confessed, snitched out those same "boys" later, the young punks performing humiliating rituals of inexplicable, sickening bitchery…

Fucking horseshit… What a bunch of fucking horseshit…

3

Just looking down at Ray made Officer Apples irritated. The kid was such a waste. The kid was tall, had a sturdy, athletic build, had hands the size of hams. He could have been a football or basketball player. Could have gone into combat sports. *This kid could have done a lot of things*, Officer Apples lamented.

Besides, just the way the kid dressed was upsetting, the kid in electric-green skinny jeans and an ugly, matching tank top. Not to mention the puffy, bubble-gum-pink basketball shoes he'd had on earlier.

Officer Apples snarled and ruminated.

The kid is something between Gumby, Lebron, and a crack baby.

A storm brewing between his ears, the officer's inner rage began to boil over, like a kettle left too long on a stovetop, and he ground his teeth and clucked loud as a cicada.

Officer Apples crept closer, leaned in toward Ray. The cop's face so close that Ray could feel the bristles of the copper's bushy moustache tickling at his earlobe. Warm pulses of the officer's breath burbled at Ray's jowls.

"Ray Ray, a cashier at Nordstrom had her engagement ring stolen. Ripped right off her finger…" Officer Apples seethed and paused, thinking of that sad-eyed kid with the horrible haircut, the one looking like a rainbow-colored animal had plopped down and died on his skull, the kid who'd literally snatched the ring off the poor girl's trembling hand.

Looking away for a split second, before swinging his gaze back to meet Ray's, the officer bellowed, "What is the NAME of the kid who took it?!" and specks of spittle exploded from the officer's mouth, hitting Ray's cheeks, like the first raindrops of a violent thunderstorm.

Ray's eyes darkened as he kept counting ghosts. Then he whimpered, shook his head, and repeated, his voice breaking, "I ain't do nothing, sir!"

Sometimes suspects attempted verbal jujitsu with the officers. Some cursed. One even spit in Officer Apples' face. But this kid… This kid had purpose. Not even this cold shower of verbal abuse could loosen his lips…

Officer Apples had had enough. He had the evidence. The camera stills. The videos. The social media posts. He had Ray leading the flash mob. He had Ray with a baseball bat. He had Ray bashing in storefront doors and display windows, swarming in force with his posse, like a furious cloud of murder hornets. He had Ray ransacking, snatching handfuls of gold necklaces, stacks of designer shirts, pricey basketball shoes. Probably the same hideous pink pair the kid had on before…

Ugh… This motherless fuck… This kid is a disgrace…

What a pile of fucking horseshit… Total and utter horseshit…

Officer Apples clucked once more and flared his nostrils.

"Hitting a 'lick,' right?" Officer Apples whispered, sardonically, into Ray's ear. Officer Apples was close as a drill sergeant, only an inch or so from Ray's face. Ray crinkled his nose at the heavy mist of Officer Apples' aftershave, his garlicy breath.

But Ray remained steadfast. Remained silent.

Officer Apples groaned in exasperation. "Ray Ray, I can either be a good friend or an awful enemy. Which would you prefer?"

Ray sat still as ice; his mouth twisted shut.

"Hmm, so you're not like that gangster rapper, 'Teriyaki Six Nine?' You're not a snitch, huh?" Officer Apples murmured, "not a… rat…"

Ray sighed, then squinted his eyes, hung his head low and stared down at the buttery shine of the linoleum floor. His expression soured. Instantly he appeared incensed.

"No I ain't," was all Ray said, in a calm but menacing tone.

Officer Apples guffawed. A dry, spiteful laugh. Then his smile again died on his lips.

This… This fucking horseshit...

This wasn't getting anywhere.

Officer Apples again thought of the terrified cashier, the pretty young girl, with those rosy cheeks and ringlets of gold hair, the girl who'd had her engagement ring snatched off her finger, and the girl's tearful description of the events... Then he thought of the jewelry store's owner, the Afghan refugee, who'd hidden in a storeroom and watched helplessly as streams of armed thieves poured in, raided and plundered his store, made a mockery of his American Dream.

And all for what? Why would these kids even be doing this? They were citizens of the greatest country the world had ever known. Where the hell were their parents? Where were their fathers?

What happened to allowances? Chores? Couldn't these kids have just mowed lawns to get some pocket cash? Taken a part-time job flipping burgers? What the hell were the schools teaching these kids these days? Critical Race Theory crap instead of Civics?

Anger swept over Officer Apples like fire through dry grass; his ruminations running hotter than hunger.

What happened to the kids in America? What happened to going out to rock concerts in the warm breath of summer? What happened to headbanging, mosh pits as a panacea for teenage angst?

What the hell happened to rock and roll? Nowadays the kids don't even sing or play instruments. They just lip sync to hip hop Billie Eyelash mumble-shit music and do dumb 10-second twerking videos on their stupid fucking phones. And Pokémon? Headphone parties? Those lame rave DJs in mouse costumes, pumping their fists like Arsenio Hall… Ugh...

What a bunch of horseshit.

What a bunch of fucking horseshit…

Anger, like a cobra, coiled inside Officer Apples. Then his rage shifted to revulsion. Officer Apples was aghast, disgusted. Disgusted with this kid, disgusted with everything.

This fucking animal… This flippant, motherless fuck…

Officer Apples turned his gaze, took two steps away from the chained prisoner. Then Officer Apples swung back around. His eyes lighting up like hot coals.

In his mind, he pictured it, saw it transpiring. Just if he were hammering a nail, Officer Apples was raising his nightstick high and bringing it down with a savage, perfect precision. Rapping the cudgel right across Ray's hands. The violent blow landing on the kid's knuckles, with a hard crack, a sound akin to a heavy piece of splintered wood being snapped in two.

He could hear Ray unloosing a wailing squeal of pain, almost a horrible impression of a coyote. He could see Ray instinctively attempting to clutch and nurse his battered hands but being arrested in motion. The young thug then folding his frame over the table, pressing his eyes shut, and growling to strangle back the burn.

Officer Apples' mind raced and his rheumy eyes bulged big as boiled eggs. His face contorted into a horrific, malicious mask. Hovering over Ray, like an apparition, the officer started to slowly lift his nightstick into the air, which caused Ray to flinch, and a tiny whimper burst from the kid's lips.

Then Officer Apples froze for a split second, lowered the cudgel, and casually holstered it. Then a devious smile broke over the cop's face, and he unloosed a tremulous laugh, turned on his heel, and padded out of the interrogation room, clucked again and muttered something about "smash and grab!"

DUDE! YOU FUCKING PISSED ON ME!

Pranks can be great fun and an excellent way to enhance a friendship. But there are instances when a prank can go too far. Such as the time back in high school… on Homecoming night...

One of the homies had stolen a bottle of Jack Daniel's from someone's dad and snuck it into the school. This was pre-Columbine, pre-9/11. Smuggling contraband was easier in those days as security checks weren't as stringent, often were non-existent…

It was Terry, Jim, and me. And we'd slipped out the back of the school gymnasium, where the homecoming dance was being held, and crept like bandits through the crisp fall evening, then set up shop out on the baseball diamond.

This was where and when Terry broke out the bottle.

We took turns swigging the potion, and Terry gagged. Then Jim made twisted faces, his arched eyebrows flying halfway up his forehead as he coughed, hissed and wheezed...

But when the bottle got to me, I don't know, it just felt smooth going down my gullet. Wasn't much different from soda. At least at first.

"Whoa, he's like, chugging it like water," I could hear Terry exclaim, his eyes narrowing but barely visible under his Oilers stocking cap. Both stood slack-jawed in amazement as I cleared the neck of the square-shaped bottle. And then some.

Strangely, I didn't feel anything. Not instantly. And we proceeded to smoke Marlboro Reds, recount the latest episode of *In Living Color*.

It was around when Terry was doing his Homey D. Clown impression that nature came calling, and I excused myself to go piss on home plate.

As I unbuckled my belt and lowered my jeans (never been a zipper-only guy, way too many steel teeth, way too close to…) I heard footsteps crunching over the stiff November grass.

"Push him!" Terry shouted, and with that, I spun around, cock in hand, and blasted a charging Jim with a steady stream of silver piss, thoroughly wetting the waist of his blue jeans and the hem of his Metallica "Ride the Lightning" T-shirt, and Jim froze in his tracks like he'd run into an invisible wall and threw his arms up in the air, his face contorted in terror.

Then Terry emerged from behind Jim, rumbling toward me, like a linebacker, with a look of venom in his barely visible eyes.

So I turned my piss-rifle on Terry. My stream strong as a showerhead. And I was suddenly feeling powerful and righteous, as if I were shooting holy water at a vampire.

But Terry had cat-quick reflexes and jumped back, eluded the silver stream, was almost like Keanu dodging bullets in *The Matrix*.

Terry, being clean, unhit, was able to laugh it off. Once I finished pissing, still aiming in Terry's general direction, I slipped my member away, buckled up and lifted my acid-washed jeans, and started to guffaw.

But Jim wasn't too amused. Not at all. His face darkened, and the ponytailed fuck cried out, "Dude, what the fuck?! You fucking pissed on me!"

"And you shouldn'ta tried to push me. That's what you get for fucking with people trying to piss," I shot back. And it was then that the liquor started to seep in. My eyes going glassy. A warm, euphoric wave washing over me, and I was experiencing that blissful, freshly buzzed feeling.

Jim himself was starting to look drunk too. On anger. His pale blue eyes growing larger; his breathing picking up, near hyperventilation. Then Jim did his best warface and charged at me again.

We were about the same size so there wasn't any physical advantage. But Jim was wet with piss. And I wanted no part of wrestling with that.

So I spun around and ran.

I ran away. Fast as Emmitt Smith. My knees pumping high in the air, and I was running at a speed I didn't know I was capable of, with piss-soaked Jim and his long blond bobbling ponytail chasing after me, and we tore through the baseball field, and then back into the gymnasium, which was packed with students, teachers, punch bowls, glittering disco balls, flashing lights, "GO TEAM!" banners, and a sea of gyrating adolescents grooving to Young MC's "Bust a Move."

Jim and I didn't get too far into the dance floor when we were apprehended by our gym teacher, the former volleyball player, the towering woman of about 6'7.

Our Amazonian gym teacher scooped us up by the scruff, like naughty puppies, and then immediately crinkled her nose at the pungent piss stink Jim was emitting.

(It's probable I'd eaten asparagus that night…)

Then our reformed hippy of a vice principal strode in, took custody of Jim and also made a pained facial expression. Then the gym teacher dragged me to the office. Called my parents to pick me up.

Though I'd been buzzed before, the chase and nearly getting into a fistfight with a friend had all but killed my high.

Once my father arrived, in the minivan, with a look on his face like he'd just stepped barefoot in dogshit, I panned my gaze and noticed Jim on the other end of the parking lot. He was staring blankly off into space, wearing gray school sweatpants and a matching gray school sweatshirt. I can't imagine what he told the vice principal.

Both of us got two days' detention.

Jim and I ran into each other, in the cafeteria, a week later, and squashed our beef. But we never talked or hung out as much and eventually lost touch…

THE TIME MACHINE OF HER THOUGHTS

Tommy.

She could never forget him.

He was the wildest, funniest, craziest person she'd ever known. Although it'd been almost 30 years since she last saw him, 30 years since that fateful day at school, still, his face was painted all over her memories.

She'd constantly think of him. Especially late at night, as she lay awake, staring at the ceiling, next to her snoring, fat farting ball of a husband.

Tommy…

Serena sometimes wondered why… Why had she been thinking so much about Tommy? It wasn't as if her life was lacking. Materialistically, aesthetically, anyway. She had a big sprawling house up on a hill, expensive cars, two beautiful kids.

Her husband, despite his somnambulant noises and noxious bodily emissions, was affectionate, and he was a fantastic father and provider. Beyond all doubts, she was living the "American Dream." So why… Why was it she longed for Tommy? And why was it she felt so vapid, so spiritually empty? Why had she been on antidepressants for the last five years? Why did she drink a couple too many glasses of wine…every single night… Why?

Why couldn't she stop thinking about Tommy, her high school boyfriend? It was so long ago that they knew each other. So long ago that they could unknowingly pass by one another in public.

But still. But still…

Tommy lingered and remained the protagonist of her most surreptitious, nocturnal thoughts…

God, it was all so long ago. They were only 18. They wore baggy clothes, flannel shirts. They looked like rejects from the cast of *Clueless.* They listened to Nirvana and Coolio.

God, it really was all so long ago. She was the quiet, skinny girl. He, on the other hand, was anything but quiet; he was a household name in their neighborhood, infamous for his idiotic exploits. The day he came to school with a mohawk, jumped up on a table and started that food fight in the cafeteria had sealed his legend...

They'd been boyfriend and girlfriend only briefly. Ever so briefly. But she'd been ruminating on that time, nostalgically, romanticizing those carefree days. She'd been thinking that it was the peak of her life. Those times with Tommy, in his arms.

He was her first and she was his. Her first love. The first guy to give her butterflies. The first to make her heart skip a beat. The first to make her forget the existence of time.

Tommy…

Tommy was so unconventional, so exciting. He'd always play pranks on her, calling her phone, at night, when she was in her bedroom, his number blocked, *69. Whenever she'd answer, he'd do funny voices. Impersonations of Joe Pesci and other mob movie characters were his specialty. He could make her laugh so hard that she'd cry. To her, he was funnier than any sitcom or standup comedian.

He'd even initially courted her through pranks. He sat behind her in social studies class and would whisper funny things to her, crack jokes and do crazy voices. During lunch, he'd sit at a table nearby and chuck fries or M&M's at her.

Normally, she'd be annoyed, or even revolted by such antics. And her friends certainly were. They'd warned her about Tommy, said he was a total loser.

It was true that he was one of the misfit kids. One of the outcast, rebel without a cause youngsters. Those freaks that sat in the back of every class. Those freaks who wore lots of black and had facial piercings. Those freaks who smoked cigarettes in school bathrooms and spray-painted street signs. Tommy and his crew were the sort of stereotypical "bad kids" you'd see in a corny afterschool special, the sort of rotten apples selected to participate in one of those "scared straight" prison visit programs where menacing, heavily tattooed inmates get up and scream in kids' faces... They were *those* type of kids…

Serena's stuck-up friends vehemently hated Tommy and his whole stupid motley crew. And while Serena agreed that Tommy's compadres were morons, for sure, him, though, Tommy, oh, he was special.

Maybe it was his eyes. His sparkly blue eyes. His eyes so effervescent, gleaming like sapphire gemstones. He had these long curly eyelashes also. She'd have to use mascara to get such eyelashes, but his were all-natural, and they were stunning.

Aside from his eyes, Tommy wasn't exactly remarkable, at least from an anatomical standpoint. He had a rather plain face. He was taller than her but not that tall. He was skinnier than her but not so skinny that he looked weak. Strangely, however, somehow, someway, despite his being gracile, he walked with a distinct air of confidence. As if he were a one-man-army. As if he were made of steel.

Along with his eyes and humor, it was probably that confidence that attracted her. Or maybe it was his insouciance. It was as if Tommy didn't care, and she'd never met anyone like that. It was as if nothing could faze him. He'd never be angry or stressed. Not when teachers yelled at him. Not during scary thunderstorms. Never. He was always cool as a cucumber. She never remembered, not once, seeing him without a smile stretching over his lips.

God, he made her smile too. Made her laugh so hard. All his silly voices and the crazy contortions he'd make with his face.

He could even be dirty as a pig, and she'd listen to him, enraptured, for hours, on the phone, her ear sore from pressing the receiver to it, but she couldn't get enough of his insane banter; even when he'd joke about having anal sex with her, surprise anal sex, saying how next time she bent over to pick something up, he'd run up behind her and mount her like a baboon, penetrate her anally. Then he'd make wild animal sounds, prognosticating, foreshadowing the surprise "buttsexual" experience. How he'd take her "bootinity," give her that "booty work."

For the record, he never did that and never tried anal with her. And again, such antics would normally revolt her, but the way he'd talk would be so funny and ridiculous that she couldn't put down the phone.

In actuality, he was romantic, and would sometimes break into her locker, leave a flower, chocolates, and a sweet note for her. Sometimes they'd ditch class and

sneak off into the woods behind school, sit on a log and cuddle and kiss forever. He was an amazing kisser too, so passionate. To this day, no one has ever kissed her like that.

She'd imagined them running away together, eloping, moving somewhere romantic, like Paris. Them growing old together. Riding off into the sunset. Being together forever.

But sadly, as all things do, their time together ended. But not how she thought. Them together in Paris, eating candlelit spaghetti dinners, them holding hands, them walking along the river, living their final days like that, nope, that was not to be. That was not how it ended.

It ended with him pulling another of his dumb pranks. But not on her. On the school….

His idiot friend, the shifty-eyed kid who always wore the backwards Metallica cap and the cut-off jean jacket, oh, and the other dumbass, the chubby kid with the rattail, those two, those Beavis and Butthead forerunners, had "double" dared Tommy to pull a fire alarm.

What a dumb thing to do, pulling a fire alarm. Why would anyone think that's funny? Plus, it carried the punishment of automatic expulsion from school. Plus, they were only one week away from graduating high school. Yet, Tommy still did it, and despite his wearing a hooded sweatshirt, he was fingered on security footage.

Tommy got expelled for pulling that fire alarm and was promptly sent off to military school. Shortly after, his parents moved. Then his trail went cold. No one knew anything about his whereabouts, other than he was sent off to military school. Being sent off to military school, in those days, was similar to being banished to Siberia. And this was before the internet age, so it was way easier to lose track of someone.

They never got to say goodbye, and she cried, every night, for weeks. But she found solace in books and became immersed in her studies. Then she eventually went to an elite school, got an MBA. Then she worked in the corporate world,

earned truckloads of cash, and married a corporate raider, a hedge fund honcho, and after having kids, she decided to become a homemaker.

And yes, she loved her cute kids more than anything. And yes, she loved her big hairy bear of a husband too. But still, but still… she found something missing.

Every day for her seemed to be the same. Every smiling waiter at every fancy restaurant, every fancy department store, every 10,000-square-foot house in her neighborhood, every Audi, Mercedes, Maserati, Tesla, Porsche, Ferrari, every spa, every place she went, it all seemed the same. Every day conjoined, cast a spectral, Siamese twin of itself. Everything was so boring. She missed the excitement of being young. She missed the feeling of anything being possible. It was as if now, everything was done. Everything was written. As if she were sleepwalking, simply going through motions. As if her life were a scripted play.

She longed for those days when everything was so new, so fun and funny. To her, nothing was funny now. Everything, everybody she knew was so serious. Everyone was depressed. Everyone was seeking an escape. Everyone in her neighborhood, like her, was on pills or drank too much. Despite her pricey gated community's glitzy exterior, the place was soulless. It was an evening gown, jewelry and makeup on a corpse.

So she'd taken to watching old TV shows, old movies, listening to old music. She'd fantasize, think back on her schooldays. Those wild high school days in particular. But mostly she'd think of him.

Tommy...

Finally, she decided to search for him. But she couldn't find him on Facebook or anywhere. Did he change his name? Move to another country? Did he pursue a career in the military? Did he go to Afghanistan, Iraq? Did he die there? What happened to him? It was the mystery, the not knowing that bothered her most.

She considered hiring a private investigator to track him down but decided against it. What would be the point of that? What would she even say to him? How could she not come off like a creepy stalker in a Lifetime movie? Did she

really think they'd have a miraculous, romantic reunion and run off to Paris? Now? Come on, she thought to herself, life isn't a Danielle Steel novel…

Whatever happened to him, whatever he became, she hoped he was well, and she hoped he was happy. Or at least content. She'd like to think he found a nice girl, settled down, was living a more fulfilling life than her. She hoped so anyway.

Whatever happened to him, he'd always be a part of her. He'd always live on in her memories. And she'd keep him in her fantasies. Forever. And in her fantasies, he'd never get old. He'd never go bald, never grow ear hair and nose hair, never grow a big floppy bulge on his belly. He'd never snore or fart in bed. He'd always be young and handsome. He'd always be her Tommy, the class clown with those hypnotic, iridescent eyes.

In the small hours of night, she'd see him. She'd see him when she'd close her eyes and enter the time machine of her thoughts. She'd see him, at night, in that realm, that watery space between sleep and consciousness. Her mind racing, she'd lay on her soft, custom-made mattress, and she'd worm and toss and turn to a silvery sheen.

All she had to do was press her eyes shut, and she'd see him. Every time she closed her eyes, she saw his face, his smiling face. Every time she closed her eyes, she'd be back there, back in the 90s, back in high school, back in Tommy's warm arms. She'd be with him again. Back in the woods behind school. And he'd make her laugh and kiss her like no one else could.

And every time she closed her eyes, entered the bliss of her fantasies, she would once again be young and free.

Tommy…

HOME ALONE KIDS GETS CANCELED

“I mean, how would you know? They could be microscopic. The aliens could even be smaller than atoms. They could be here already. They could be inside you. In your guts. Crawling up your colon, coming out your…”

“Okay, I think that’s enough information.”

A phone from the office upstairs rang out, sounding almost like a fire alarm, interrupting the group discussion.

“This place has a rotary phone in the office.”

“A typewriter too.”

“What’s a rotary phone?”

“But do aliens believe in Jesus? That’s what I’m wondering.”

“Yo, you’re fricking right the aliens believe in Jesus. God created Jesus so He created aliens too.”

“Aliens are God’s creatures. I bet the aliens have churches, megachurches and shit… Aliens on some intergalactic Joel Osteen shit…”

“Please watch the language!”

In the windowless basement of the church, the support group sat in a circle. Most of the participants were somewhere between 30 and 50. The oldest seemed to be the haggardly motorcycle lady, at around 60 or so. The motorcycle lady sat looking extremely disinterested. Her legs were tightly crossed, and she cocked her head to the side, rolled her eyes, and brushed a long lock of stringy gray hair behind her ear. Then she went back to biting her nails.

The youngest of the group was maybe 20, a catatonic ginger with a chipmunk face. The ginger was dressed in all black and sat, expressionless, in an electric wheelchair, his hands balled into fists and his crystal blue eyes fixed on the cream-colored tile floor.

“My turn? Yup. Okay, like, I used to think I saw dead people, ghosts. Like that kid in the movie.”

“Isn’t that kid dead now?”

“I heard he got put in jail for smoking crack and stealing a car.”

“Happens to every child star. Except the *Home Alone* kid. He turned out alright. I think.”

“Nah, the *Home Alone* kid made racist comments about Asians and got cancelled. I read about it on Twitter.”

“Wait, isn’t he married to an Asian?”

“That gives him NO excuse!”

The ginger in the wheelchair coughed loudly, then swallowed his phlegm.

“Me? Yeah. Well, uh, just last night I talked to my sister, for the first time in years. She’d gotten hooked on meth. Then robbed a 7-11 at knifepoint. Then stole her ex-boyfriend’s sister’s car. Then did two years in a federal penitentiary, came out covered in tattoos.”

“Face tattoos?”

“Yup, a big red pentagram on her forehead. I saw it on Facebook.”

“Nah, that’s not going to help with the job search. Can you imagine being an HR person, calling someone in for an interview, and then the applicant walks in, has face tattoos, a flipping pentagram on their head? Geez Louise.”

“Then the face-tattoo-person turns back to crime. It’s a self-fulfilling prophecy.”

“Well, face tattoos are far more accepted these days. But maybe not a pentagram.”

“Actually, she got a job as a customer service rep for a moving company. Works from home, from her trailer.”

“That’s weird, man. Picture that, calling up to ask a question and you’re talking to someone with a tattoo of a pentagram on their head.”

“Better than someone from India. I can’t understand their accents.”

“That’s racist.”

“Racist that I can’t understand what they’re saying? Really?!”

“You and the *Home Alone* kid. You’re both racists!”

“Cool it, you two.”

“My sister got trained for phone work in prison. It was part of her vocational classes, taking customer service calls. She also learned telemarketing.”

“Oh my God, I am never screaming at another telemarketer.”

“Yo, for sure you better not yell at that telemarketer. That telemarketer breaks out of prison, hunts down your ass.”

“Please watch your language.”

Heading the group was a frumpy woman in her 30s. She had freckly, pallid skin and bushy blond hair that’d been tied into a thick ponytail. She wore a gray pantsuit and shiny black shoes that appeared too formal for the occasion, making her look more like a businesswoman than a counselor. Her voice was throaty yet strangely stentorian.

The bone-thin 50ish fellow, sitting near the elevator, belched loudly and everyone collectively groaned. But he paid it no mind. He just sat, bobbing back and forth, scratching his left arm compulsively, his small eyes darting about the room, frantically, like a frightened cat’s. Every couple minutes he curled his upper lip, made a clicking sound with his mouth, sort of like a cicada.

“In the future, robots will do those jobs. Robots will do everything. Robots will be attorneys and accountants.”

“It’s not your turn yet, please…”

“Look, already, you call up your bank or something, and it’s a robot answering, and they make those typing sounds when you talk to them, as if it’s a person. Honestly, I find the whole thing creepy.”

“I don’t know. I don’t mind it when there’s a touchscreen menu in a restaurant. I don’t have to bother with waiting to call over a person to order my food.”

“I saw a story on the news, ‘bout a restaurant using drones to deliver food to tables.”

“Hey, that’s better than a waiter. I hate calling out, excuse me! Excuse me! Like the person’s name is ‘Excuse Me.’”

“At most places they wear a nametag. Or they tell you their name.”

“Like I’m supposed to remember their name. I forget my own name sometimes.”

“I can’t spell my name.”

“Even if they have a nametag, I still call them ‘Excuse Me.’”

“I like calling people by their name. Even a stranger.”

“Excuse me!”

“What a horrible job, being a waiter.”

“In France, being a waiter is a well-paid, respected profession.”

“Come on, I mean, if you’re a waiter, you’re basically someone’s bitch.”

“Language.”

“Oh, so you’re a misogynist too!”

“I said cool it! Remember that I need to sign off on your paperwork, you guys.”

“Please don’t use gendered-language!”

“Yo, that’s why they spit in your food. Because you don’t call them by their name. Always saying ‘excuse me.’”

“No, it’s because you’re a racist! That’s why they spit in your food! Because you’re a racist! And a misogynist!”

“Hashtag FUCK YOU!”

“Cool it!”

“You ever had a waiter with a pentagram or other face tattoo?”

“I’d welcome that. They’re being honest. True to themselves.”

“I can imagine a robot with a face tattoo.”

“I for one am looking forward to the robots. As long as things don’t go all *Terminator*, I’m cool with it.”

“Universal Basic Income. I’m with it.”

“No one would rob a 7-11 if there were UBI.”

“Robots would rob 7-11s.”

“Robots would rob other robots.”

“Robots wouldn’t be racist. If there were robot police officers, like Robocop, they wouldn’t shoot...”

“Oh stop!”

“Robocalls.”

“Nah, since the robots are made by people, they’d be extensions of us, be as flawed as us. Racist and all that.”

“Stop accusing the robots of racism! Be nice to the robots! God made the robots!”

“But do the robots believe in Jesus?”

“Just don’t call the robots ‘Excuse Me.’”

A bell, which sounded like a wind chime, gently jingled from the freckly pantsuit lady’s purse, signaling an end to the meeting.

“See, right there, that’s a robot, a little square robot. They’ve already infiltrated us!!”

“It could be an alien too. An alien robot. A microscopic alien robot!”

“Excuse me!”

“Okay, okay, everybody. Thank you all for coming. I’ll see you next week. Please bring over your paperwork so I can sign you off.”

I SHOT MY TEACHER

"Bang bang!"

The students in the classroom panicked. Jumped to their feet. Shrieks, gasps, and curse words blended into the cacophony of chairs licking linoleum, sneakers squeaking as my classmates stampeded toward the door, and one kid even jumped out an open window.

(Luckily we were on the first floor…)

Now let me tell ya, the teacher I'd just shot, Mrs. Henry, oh, she was such a bully, such a fucking Nazi. She'd torment the kids, call everyone "genius" condescendingly, and she really seemed to take a special sadistic joy in making kids cry.

People like her, I gotta say, I've never understood. I've never understood those who are cruel to children. Even when I was a kid, I didn't understand grownups like that. I mean, discipline is one thing, but abasing, abusing kids, that sort of behavior, I could never get it…

And whatever malice possessed Mrs. Henry, whatever caused her to engage in such vituperative behavior, oh, it was strong. It was a demon inside her. It was dark, and it was evil.

For fuck's sake, the lady just looked evil too.

She had a certain prehistoric reptilian look, almost like a twin sister of Jabba the Hutt. She even had a voice similar to James Earl Jones, too, a sonorous boom of a voice, and it'd cut through us, like a sharp knife, slice open our souls. Hers was a voice of pain and horror, a voice that bashed and shattered you like a baseball bat breaking through a plate glass window.

Perhaps Mrs. Henry really was a malevolent space creature from a galaxy far, far away. I could see that… Or perhaps she was the muse, the inspiration for Jabba the Hut… I could see that too…

Mrs. Henry sure was about the same size as Jabba. Just a massive being. And look, I'm not super fit. I'm not ripped. I'm not The Rock or anything. I got a couple extra

pounds on me, a little spare tire going. No one's perfect and all that. And I'm not trying to "fat shame" her or anything, err, well, shit, maybe I am, because, seriously, let me tell ya, ole' Mrs. Henry, she was HUGE. She might have been the fattest person I ever saw. Fat as one of those people you see on Maury or whatever trashy daytime talk show. One of those gargantuan beings that have to be forklifted from their bedroom. That fucking fat. For real.

Mrs. Henry must have weighed damn near 400 pounds. And she had that certain unpleasant scent obese people often have, that reek of something between piss and perspiration, though on most days her stink was masked by a particularly overpowering, nauseating perfume that smelled like a cross between chemicals and fake roses… I'm not sure which of her stenches was worse…

I mean, really, I'm not sure how one gets that large, how one gets to be around 5'4 and 400 pounds, but I'm guessing it might have been all the soda she drank. I don't think I ever saw her without a 2-liter of Coke nearby. Betcha that lady sucked down a gallon a day of the sugary stuff.

Or I guess it coulda been from lack of exercise too. Shit, I don't think I ever saw Mrs. Henry walk. Anywhere. At all. Hell, I'm not sure she could actually walk. She'd use a mobility cart to circle the classroom and cruise the hallways between classes. And it was when she wheeled through the hallways that she dished out the worst of her abuse. Sniping at and insulting students as she rode by.

To see ole' Mrs. Henry rolling forth inspired terror in us all.

Mrs. Henry seemed to relish it too. She seemed to feed on our fears, sniffed for blood, and took a particular glee in putting kids down, especially the awkward, shy, quiet types. The wounded animals. The weak, the vulnerable, those straggling from the herd. Those were the ones who got it the worst.

Yup, thinking back further on it, I think that was the only time I'd see Mrs. Henry smile or laugh, when she'd insult people. It really did seem to bring her joy.

I mean, whatever it was about you, whatever was most embarrassing, she'd go after. Your dental headgear, your braces, your acne, your garlic breath, your shitty grammar, your shitty math scores, your high-riding jeans, your hand-me-downs, a color clashing outfit, a stain on your shirt, any sort of body odor (ironically enough), your bad teeth, nose hair, ear hair, you had too much ear wax, uneven

sideburns, unruly bangs, an embarrassing haircut, an untied shoe, hell, any of your funky ways was fair game.

(And if you did anything notably bad, Mrs. Henry would never let you forget about it. Like the tall cute Hispanic girl, who got caught picking her nose, in class, and Mrs. Henry went on to terrorize the girl practically every day about it…)

The lady was always launching zingers. She was like a fat female Jeff Ross, an angrier Bill Burr, or Don Rickles' pissed-off poltergeist conjured from a Ouija board. Probably even meaner.

I tell ya, that Mrs. Henry really should have been a roast battle comedian. I think she'd missed her calling. Maybe that's why she was so bitter.

Whatever it was, she sure as shit was bitter. Yessir, that ole' Mrs. Henry was bitter as fuck. She was a meanie. A grinch. A scrooge. A Stalinist. Evil incarnate. And everyone was totally terrified of her. Crowds would part, like the Red Sea, as she'd ride down those bone-gray school hallways, in her mobility cart, her face screwed into a sourpuss snarl, and an icy, wicked glare flickering in her deep-set eyes…

Yessir, clear as day, I can still see ole' Mrs. Henry rolling by, menacingly, launching drive-by putdowns… Mrs. Henry hurling insults, like Molotov cocktails, at any student in the vicinity. The lady was such a terrorist. A fascist. Fucking hell on wheels.

Now I never saw or heard of Mrs. Henry slapping, spanking, or hitting any of the kids, striking them physically. And I guess that'd be difficult to do, from a mobility cart.

Nah, for Mrs. Henry, her words were her real weapon. And brandish them she did. Whenever she'd call on a student, had him/her come to the chalkboard, and if he/she got an answer wrong, she'd castigate, belittle the kid, call them "stupid" or scoff at them. Oftentimes kids would run out of the classroom crying. But mostly we'd take it, silently, keep the pain to ourselves.

Sometimes we'd talk about it in the lunchroom. Sometimes a kid would flee her class, or be lambasted by her in the hallways, then he/she would come sit down,

in tears, to the lunch table, and spill his/her guts, call Mrs. Henry a “fat bitch” and all that. But no one had the temerity to stick up to her.

We’d wonder aloud how it was that she kept her job, acting like she did. Why on Earth would the school keep such a fascist around? Was it teacher tenure?

Look, this was before the days of social media, so it was easier then to keep a rogue teacher under wraps. And really, this was a drastically different day and time. A different America. A tougher America. It was a day and time when parents didn’t fight with schools or teachers much. Like, if you went home and told Moms or Pops that your teacher was calling you names, your parents would probably say you deserved it and tell you to stop being a bitch, put on your big boy pants, shut the fuck up, and go wash the dishes and then mow the damn lawn.

These were pre- “woke” times.

But fuck that. Discipline was one thing, however Mrs. Henry insulting people, making kids cry, mocking them, humiliating them, calling them names, it wasn’t right. It’d been gnawing at me the whole semester. Boiling up inside me. Bubbling up in my throat like vomit.

And when the cute little blond ballerina girl I had a crush on broke down in tears following one of Mrs. Henry’s tirades (the ballerina had done a poor job cutting a piece of cardboard), it was then I decided that someone had to do something. And that someone would be me.

While ditching gym class to read Richard Bachman’s *Rage*, in the school library, I suddenly had a lightbulb moment. Oh yeah, motherfucker, I’d give ole’ Mrs. Henry, Jabba, a special surprise. I’d teach the teacher a lesson she’d never forget…

A week later, on a stormy late winter morning, with the bald trees swaying in the chilly wind, I strutted into school, feeling like a million bucks. I was wearing a pair of mirrored aviator glasses, combat boots, and had on all black clothes, and in my waistband, I’d brought a fun little toy, a plastic pistol that I smuggled in easily.

Walking into the classroom, with the gun stuffed under my NIN sweatshirt, I felt the cold weight of the weapon pressed to my stomach, and the weapon was making me feel 10-feet-tall.

Walking into the classroom, I saw Mrs. Henry perched behind her desk, in the front center of the room. Mrs. Henry, the fat fucking caustic tub of shit. Mrs. Henry, the big ball of lard, her hideous face all scrunched up, and she was berating the meek little nerdy kid in the front row, the kid's horn-rimmed eyeglasses all fogging up and slipping off his long pointy nose, the poor kid frowning and slumping in his chair.

This was it. I'd had enough. And I decided it was now or never to show up the flabby fucking tyrant.

Strolling over toward her, I felt like Clint Eastwood, in one of those old Western films. I even had the swagger. I approached her like a cowboy, like it was a showdown at the O.K. Corral. Shit, I could even hear an ominous whistle, old-timey Western music playing in my head.

Seeing me sauntering over, like I was John Wayne reincarnated, Mrs. Henry swung her repulsive lizardy face toward me, and halted her verbal abuse of the meek kid, whose parents had recently died in a fucking plane crash, dammit. I then chortled and screamed at her, commanded that she "SHUT the FUCK up!"

Her face, her anger, withered and died, deflated like a balloon that'd been untied. I don't think anyone had ever spoken to her like that. She sat in a mortified silence, for a couple of seconds, then her fierceness returned, and her startled face twisted back into the monster I knew. She was again the big blubbery being, the Jabba, the plus-size Satan, and I could see her curved chest heaving, her readying a volley of verbal torment.

That's when I reached under my sweatshirt and whipped out my gun. Pointed it right at her face, holding it with both hands, aiming it at her forehead.

"Wahh!" was all she could muster, in a creaky wheel type squeal, and she threw up her chubby, greasy paws, lamely, like a pathetic crook being busted by the police. Her jaw dropped limply, then her eyes pressed shut and her face knotted into a mask of terror.

Then it was pandemonium, everyone in the class roaring and running.

I thought of something witty to say before I pulled the trigger. But it wouldn't matter anyway. Actions speak louder than words.

Then I did it. I pulled the trigger. I shot my teacher.

But not with a bullet.

The gun was actually a water pistol. And I shot her in the face with Coca-Cola.

Mrs. Henry sat firmly planted in her mobility cart, which was parked behind her desk. She didn't even try to escape, wheel away, or zoom off. Nope. She just sat there. Trembling and hyperventilating. Mrs. Henry frozen, stuck as a stick in the mud as the mess of sweet brown syrupy soda streaked down her face. And that ole' Mrs. Henry's sure was wearing a shocked expression; shit, her face was contorted as someone choking on poison gas.

Suddenly I smelled piss and spotted a yellow puddle below Mrs. Henry's desk.

"Bang bang!" I screamed at her, sardonically. Then I wiped the sweat from my brows, and chortled again, this time like a hyena, and my heart palpitated as I let the water gun fall to the floor. Then I took off running, feeling like God!

Of course I was later arrested and expelled, sent to a reform school. However, to my surprise, Mrs. Henry refused to press criminal charges.

I also heard that, following the incident, she kept mostly quiet. Didn't say too much. To anyone.

And at the end of the school year, she retired.

FEAR OF THE FEAR OF FLYING

March 2002

“Listen, nothing will shock me. I’m a psychiatrist,” proclaimed the tiny woman, speaking loudly over the white noise whir of the plane’s engines.

The tiny woman must have only been 4’11 and half her height came from the mop of tangly jet-black hair that sprang from her little egg-shaped head. The tiny woman had bronzed skin and wore bulky, squarish eyeglasses that occupied most of her ovular face.

The long-legged, buxom blond flight attendant squinted, bit her lip, looked the lady over and guessed her age at around 50. The flight attendant then figured the tiny lady was probably telling the truth. After all, she’d just stepped in from the first-class cabin and was wearing several gold rings, a gold necklace, diamond earrings, and had on a loose-fitting Chanel dress and matching designer sandals.

“Hey, try to take a deep breath,” the tiny woman sounded as she stepped down the aisle and sat next to the passenger in seat 24A. The passenger in 24A had begun violently hyperventilating the second the plane took off and had screamed an explosive horror-movie wail as the landing gear bumped up into the plane’s belly.

The panicked passenger sat unresponsive, quivering, gritting her teeth. Her hands strangling the armrests, her eyes were bulging, almost jumping off her face.

The panicked passenger’s outburst had freaked out everyone on the plane. She’d gone from a nondescript woman to a threat, a potential terrorist in mere seconds. Everyone aboard was watching her in dismay. The wolf-eyed, balding ex-military type across the aisle seemed to be sizing her up, mentally shuffling through the quickest ways of killing her.

The young Sikh two rows behind the petrified passenger had unhooked his belt and was narrowing his eyes and popping up his head over the seat, like a malevolent gopher, and was readying a leather belt, fashioning it as a possible whip or garrote. Given the stink-eye he usually received on planes, especially in the days after 9/11, he was ready for anything.

The elderly man in suspenders, next to the Sikh, sat shaking his head and muttered to himself about how he missed the days when “most ah you had to worry about on a plane was a dang crying baby… And you could smoke too…”

Probably no one on board would’ve suspected the passenger in question to cause a scene. She was just another late-middle-aged, slightly overweight woman. She wore a clean red floral-patterned dress, and her hair had been cut short, like most women of a certain age.

Although she was on the tall side, at least for a woman, at around 6’0, aside from that, she was about as anonymous as they come. As anonymous and invisible as any typically dressed, overweight aging woman.

“Okay, breathe in for four seconds, hold your breath for four seconds, then exhale for four seconds, then repeat,” whispered the tiny woman, as she leaned into and held the frightened passenger’s hand and counted breaths.

“One, two, three, four.”

“One, two, three, four,” repeated the passenger, almost suffocating on the words, her cheeks puffing out like little half-moons as she then held in her breath. After a few breathing cycles, her chest stopped heaving and she rested back into her seat, wiped her watery eyes with the back of her hand.

“I’m afraid… I’m afraid of flying…” confessed the passenger, in shaky syllables, as she shifted her gaze and stared directly into the tiny woman’s upcurved, caramel-colored eyes.

The tiny woman smiled at her, caringly. It was a genuine smile. A smile that crinkled the skin at the corners of the eyes. A smile that showed dimples. It was a smile of honesty, compassion, and understanding.

Then the tiny woman stated in a maternal voice that “you should think about the statistics,” that “flying is the safest method of transportation. Your chances of anything happening were far worse in the car ride to the airport. But most people don’t fear cars the way they fear planes.”

"Too many movies," said the passenger, her speech stabilizing and her breath calming down, "I watch too many movies. And too much news."

"I know," responded the tiny woman, and the two shared a laugh.

MIDDLE SCHOOL FRIEND

I hadn't seen her since the last day of middle school.

But I recognize her the instant I see her at the entrance gate.

People say how the world is a small place. And maybe it is, when you find yourself on a test run, with a person you sat near in 8th grade biology class, 30 years ago.

Details are hazy, but a fog soon clears in my head, and I remember the time I stole a box of tampons from her locker. I'm not sure how I was able to break into her locker, but I did.

It's clear as day… It was the afternoon of that epic food fight, in the cafeteria, that soggy day, when the dining hall full of 8th graders erupted into bedlam. Tossing bread, sloppy joes, pudding, cartons of milk, apples, mac n cheese, tater tots… The cafeteria a happy hurricane of crappy food. Crappy food flying in every direction. And me, I was throwing tampons, until our principal, a tall Black woman who used to play semi-pro basketball, all 6'6 of her, stormed into the cafeteria.

No one dared throw food at the principal; in fact, upon her entering the cafeteria, the whole room hushed silent, and the masses of brace faces, zit faces, embarrassed adolescents went still as a diorama. The principal's arms akimbo, her face was contorted in a mask of anger, and I noticed she got even angrier after seeing the scattered tampons strewn about the white-tiled cafeteria floor.

Everyone stood frozen in terror, possibly expecting that any second our principal might start snatching kids, chewing their heads off, literally or figuratively. I'm not sure if he was the first, but a fat kid we called "Rerun," bolted out of the cafeteria,

running far faster than a kid that fat should be able to run, and, almost on cue, everyone else followed suit, kids sprinting, scurrying off like frightened cats.

And I remember she'd fallen, twisted her ankle, nearly got trampled by kids escaping the principal's wrath. The principal, towering over the kids, was like Godzilla moving through Tokyo as the panic ensued.

Yet I remained, helped her up to her feet. Ringed my arm around her shoulder. Then I helped her to the nurse's office, feeling as if we were soldiers maneuvering through a battlefield…

Yup. It sure had been a while. A short lifetime.

I hadn't seen her since middle school. Those wanton days. When everything was terrifying, forbidden and fun. When days were a month and a month was a year. Time felt different then.

After middle school, she'd transferred to a "sports" school... It was weird like that, back then, how I'd have classmates who'd transfer schools, and after that, they'd basically vanish. This was far before social media, so once a person transferred schools or moved, they were gone. Dust in the wind… You'd need a private investigator or you'd have to put their picture on a milk carton if you ever wanted to find them again…

But she's returned, if only for this moment. She's across the tube. Her eyes are narrowed to slits, but I can still see her blues. Her face is similar to its former incarnation. It's round as a pie. And her cheeks are chubbier and redder than I recall. She looks somehow like a 44-year-old 14-year-old. It's off-putting.

We're clad in white jumpsuits, strapped by smart ropes to our bucket seats. The engine is a whir. Barely audible. There are various beeps. A flash of white light every few seconds, a spark or two as we touch the curve. Then we're rocketed and sucked through, out the other end in minutes. A safe passage, safely passing a series of sonic miles.

Exiting the cartridge, I approach her. There's no need to make introductions. We'd been competing in a staring contest throughout the journey. We know each other.

"What do you do now?"

"I'm a middle school principal."

I see she's grown to over 6'5 and is dwarfing me. She says she played shooting guard in the WNBA.

"Divorced, no kids."

"Divorced, one kid."

"Living the dream?"

"I'm trying."

SPONTANEOUS OUTBURSTS OF DANCING

I love funk music. Possibly too much. When I hear James Brown, Prince, Parliament Funkadelic, I don't know, man, it just… Sets me off.

Like fireworks.

For real, I lose it. The funk comes on, and I can't resist. I must dance.

And I'm a horrible dancer too. I've got no rhythm. I've got two left feet.

But I don't care.

I let loose and the music courses through my veins.

When I'm at home, it's not a problem. But if I'm out, if I'm at a supermarket, and "Uptown Funk" comes on the loudspeaker, I can't contain the urge. I must dance.

I'll be in the fruit aisle, shaking my groove-thing.

Yes, people will point, yell, aim smartphones at me.

But it doesn't matter. Because I know what I have to do.

I must dance. Throw my limbs around, punch, kick the air. I must dance. Breakdancing, Salsa dance moves. It's whatever comes to mind. And body.

The music, the funk just takes control.

As it should.

THE GREEN BANDIT

FRED CITY, FUCKSTATE: There have been numerous reports of a tiny man, around 5'0 tall and of sleight frame, wearing a neon green spandex jumpsuit, running through city streets, and snatching cellphones away from those walking while texting.

After grabbing the phones, the man stops and hurls the devices into traffic, and then laughs loudly while dashing off.

Panicked pedestrians, in a quandary, are often unsure of whether to go after the man or chase after their phones. Most have cursed, yelled at the man and then pursued their phone.

The man is described as having a cannon of an arm, able to throw the phones, upwards of perhaps 40 to 50 yards, usually in a discus motion. He is also lightning quick, according to eyewitnesses, running nearly as fast as a cheetah.

Furthermore, the “Green Phone Bandit,” as he has been dubbed, is fleet on his feet, and utilizes a variety of stiff-arms, juke moves, and hurtling techniques to evade capture. In addition, witnesses report his spandex suit to be slathered in a greasy substance, rendering it difficult for passersby, good Samaritans to apprehend him.

One security guard attempting to tackle him stumbled, slipped and headbutted a parking meter. The parking meter was unharmed.

The bandit has been apparently targeting Apple stores and Starbucks. The majority of his attacks have taken place within the vicinity of such establishments.

Witnesses report that the phone snatcher is a ginger, wears Reebok Pumps and has the word “think” in multiple languages scrawled in black ink all over his tight-fitting green clothes.

One witness reported the Green Bandit had emerged from a manhole. Several witnesses reported him kicking open the trunks of parked cars, bursting out screaming gibberish. All of the cars involved had Theranos stickers on their passenger side windows.

It’s not known at this time if the phone smasher has any association with the company.

FRED City Police are investigating but don’t seem to care. If you have any information about the Green Bandit, or if you are the Green Bandit, you can basically just go fuck yourself.

Now back to the nonsense…

JACK DORSEY YOGA DREAM

Drunk off the Korean liquor, I swam into bed, stretched into a crucifixion pose. There I spun, floated into the mouth of sleep.

Soon I dreamt I was back at college, holding a stack of Bibles. I was heavy as the weight of a planet, but my soul was like dust, my soul dispersing, in a trillion mites, moving through a blustery passage of autumnal air.

My bald head felt like a solar panel, collecting courage in golden shine.

Milky clouds parted and a fire red sun hovered forth, over the horizon, and its heat rose in ripples, sizzled the sidewalk, shifted the season.

I was sweating. And I was searching. For the library. Everywhere. I wandered and wandered. My feet were claws. I was a cognoscenti with an invisible gun to my head. I was a knife to a toddler's neck, an intruder in an Armani suicide suit.

I was diffident and chimerical. I was a belly-dancer making a declaration of war.

Stalking the mysteriously vast, verdant campus, the campus seemed ancient yet novel. It was a complicated system of bushes, trees, flowers, and glass buildings. It was a matrix, a whole new world. A world bigger and weirder and far more fragrant than I remember it. Almost every building had been reshaped, remodeled. Once gray and square, the structures were now clear as freshwater and either triangular as pyramids or tubular as penises. Everything was towering stacks of glass.

It was as if the college had been destroyed and rebuilt by gay aliens. Freudian flashers. Or extraterrestrial Egyptians with Napoleon complexes.

The students on campus all looked so young. Many were in grizzly bear suits; some were in bikinis, and were girls going wild, twerking and dancing like strippers as they pranced about the college. And many egg-shaped bodies were wearing VR goggles, and a ziggy zzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz-zooming by on neon-flashing hoverboards.

An aboriginal tribesman, in only a loincloth, his body painted bright bold colors, held a sharp wooden spear, and darted through the campus. He was chasing a cheetah creature. The cheetah bolted by, its mouth frothing. I was amazed at how adroitly it maneuvered through the masses. And the smile twisting at its lips displayed admirable mirth.

It dawned on me, like a lightning bolt, like God's command, that I should be looking elsewhere for the library. But where? In the eyes of the masses, I still was only a fairy. A face for the toilet. A cockroach on hindlegs. Dead as wood.

Worse yet, I was an iconoclast. I'd violated the sacred library covenant. Flicking my gaze at the Bibles, at their yellowish pages, I couldn't believe I'd kept them for so long.

Passing by a young, petite nun, with rotted teeth and the body of a goat, I saw the nun's upper lip curling in the hush of the wind. In her tiny hands, she clutched and displayed, over her chest, a handwritten sign asking for Jesus money because her cat was starving.

About to slip her $20, I asked her if she smoked crack. She said no. She said she didn't even smoke weed. I told her she should smoke weed, passed her the $20, and politely suggested she talk to Jesus about learning coding or robotics.

Around and around and around I went. My footsteps were in hieroglyphic patterns. Every path I cut through the campus led me elsewhere. None led to the library.

I saw the shiny triangular football stadium. I saw a pyramid pavilion. A carrot-shaped gazebo. But still no fucking library.

Then I trudged by a shivering longnecked slender man in a ski mask and silver wetsuit. His legs looked far too long for his frame. He was playing "Hangar 18" by Megadeth on a set of bagpipes as he stood defiantly in front of the sprawling flying saucer cafeteria that had an assortment of dining options way superior to when I attended the school, only 15 years prior. (Dammit, sometimes I'd skateboard a mile in the snow to get fresh, hot donuts! You ever skateboard in the snow? DON'T EVEN FUCKING TRY!)

I found my way to a domed building. It was nondescript. Solid gray, with no windows. It had only a five-story-high open double door leading up to its golden dome.

A force of concern, a signal of nature drew me forward, and from behind the dome, I could see the library's clocktower. Figuring I was following the correct direction, I allowed the flow, knowingly hopping on one leg.

I hopped and hopped, into the dome; inside, it was like a massive post-apocalyptic subway station, empty, with veins of corridors branching in multiple directions. But every corridor led to a dead end. A closed door. Or a door painted over a wall.

I hopped backward, still on one leg, out of the dome, and saw the clocktower of the library was a balloon, a hot-air balloon, floating upwards slowly, toward a fluffy white ball of clouds.

The cheetah ran by me again, but I didn't spot the tribesman. The cheetah stopped, after it passed me, and did a U-turn, trotted over.

The cheetah lifted its gaze and our eyes connected. Blasts of electricity bolted between us. The cheetah shocked me with an all-knowing look. It knew where the library was. I knew it knew. It knew that I knew that it knew.

Lifting my wing, I let my stack of Bibles tumble to the ground. Then I tore off my wolf gray Armani suicide suit, and, like a male stripper, I ripped my white dress shirt to shreds and then wiped away the shirt's stringy bits, like fallen hairs, and Kung Fu kicked off my possum pussy wingtips.

Donning only my tiger-print man thong and knee-high beige llama socks, my hairy body was joyously exposed to the elements. Then I bent forward, collected my Bibles, stood upright, and triumphantly mounted the cheetah, like a horse, and I yodeled, and the creature called God.

The cheetah kicked up steam, sprinted fast as fuck onto the outside road, then hit the highway, and we ran through rush-hour traffic, the cheetah weaving through the gridlock, motorists double-taking, rubbernecking, snapping cell phone photos of me, a hairy middle-aged man, in a thong. Me, a hairy man, with a stack of Bibles, tucked under my arm. Me, riding a cheetah, a fucking cheetah, like a galloping horse, through the machinery and hubbub of the highway.

The cheetah took an exit, barreled down an offramp, toward an abandoned building. The cheetah then stopped in front of the massive decaying tower and growled.

I stepped off the cheetah, and the animal darted off. Then the aboriginal tribesman reappeared, this time in a jetpack, flying after the cheetah, shouting tribal chants.

I hopped on one leg toward the dark tower. It was an empty library, alright, commandeered, the property purchased by Twitter. An electronic billboard flickered atop the rotting remains of the structure, displaying a picture of Jack Dorsey, naked, in a yoga pose.

In front of the building was a beeping attention box; its yellow lights pulsed like I was looking down at it from a plane, as if approaching a city at night…

Beside the box was a firepit, constructed from a circle of broken Korean liquor bottles. In the pit's center was a burning pile of Bibles.

CONFESSIONS OF AN ARSONIST

火

Ever since I was a little kid, I have been a pyromaniac.

I understand pulchritude in the corpus of fire, its shape, arrays and radiant colors. Its eminent heat and energy. How elegantly it licks, sucks and swallows…

My first memory of fire involved watching a middle-aged black man walking down the street. The black man paused midstride and pulled out a small square of silver from his coat pocket.

The black man had these gargantuan hands, and with the plump ball of his thumb, he flicked open the silver square, and KERRRRCH, the most magnificent tiny bulb of orange appeared and arose; this spectacular little triangle of light that he controlled so masterfully. He then lifted the flickering flame up to a cigarette, and POOOOF! a small cloud of smoke burst and purled from his mouth.

Transfixed, I craned my neck as my housekeeper led me down the street to our awaiting driver, and I stared in awe at the miraculous power this magical black man beheld. He noticed me staring too and smiled at me and winked, looked away, checked his watch and sauntered off.

After that, anytime I saw fire, I could not avert my eyes from it.

On the TV, I came to adore action cartoons and movies, especially their explosions, watching the heroes jump away from bombs and burning buildings.

I would secretly wish, though, the heroes would instead dive into the explosions so I could see the fire singe and scorch them, and I would pause, rewind, and rewatch blasts and detonations over and over and over again.

The news too, I came to love, after I passed by the televisions in Father's office, and one of the televisions was tuned to the news while Father was on a business call.

Behind Father was a row of wall-mounted widescreen televisions, carved into the oak paneling, and on one of the televisions was live news coverage of a quaint, single-family house on fire, firefighters fecklessly battling the blaze with retardant and water cannons.

Father in a sweater vest, his arms on his hips, his shiny white hair slicked back, was yelling frantically, something about "tax shelters," his angry face pointing and pecking at one of the speaker phones on his mahogany desk, and he was screaming like mad at the phone, at the top of his lungs, as I stood and watched the fire, in awe, and my heart skipped a beat as the small house crumbled, succumbed to flame.

I did not know the news had fires, but after knowing it did, I would watch the news, every day, hoping to hear about any fires. I would watch either in Father's office, or in the kitchen, as the chefs prepared meals (and there I could also stare

at the rings of beautiful blue flames licking phosphorescently under the pots and pans).

火火

We were lucky to live in California where there were forest fires and wildfires, Santa Ana winds. Wildfires were the best. How they would spread and annihilate such large areas, cause firestorms.

I got to see wildfires on TV regularly. See wildfires swallowing up trees, houses, buildings and hollowing out vehicles. I would perch and sit at the television with my mouth agape, watching in amazement at the fire's delightful sizzle and pop and the hypnotic yellow orange and white colors of the burning…

Once I was old enough to browse the internet, I began to seek online videos of fires. First seeking out scenes of fires, bombs blowing up in films, and I watched several fire-related films, including the movie Firestarter, which I viewed 286 times.

But when I discovered YouTube, I found that authentic footage was far more invigorating.

I first preferred violent fires, fire attacks, and I went through a phase where I compiled an exquisite database of Molotov cocktail throws, most of which were derived from riot footage from foreign countries.

Then I diversified. I conducted internet and library research, assiduously studied famous fires from history like The Great Fire of Rome in 64 AD, The London Fire of 1666, Peshtigo 1871, The 1923 Tokyo Fire, San Francisco 1906, and The 1956 Marcinelle Mining Disaster, to name a few…

I was enthralled upon learning the histories of great transportation fires, ship fires, and building fires and wartime fires and watching corresponding online video of wartime napalm attacks, firebombing raids, firebombing of cities in World War 2.

I became a student of notable arson cases like The Pillow Pyro, The Happy Land Fire, The UpStairs Lounge Attack, and was infatuated by the numerous fire attacks on buses, public transit in China.

I became a Wikipedia editor, contributing and editing statistical information, references on fire disaster and arson attack pages.

And I played video games like Grand Theft Auto so I could shoot flamethrowers at people and vehicles…

All my dreams involved fires, me on fire, happy to be burning and/or me setting other people on fire and them laughing and/or me doing push-ups or jumping jacks or aerobics in front of burning towers, houses, cars, trains, planes or forests.

火火火

While watching and dreaming were passive, cathartic kicks, I required more stimulation. I had to try fire for myself. Feel it with the skin of my own hands. See it living with my own eyes. So I decided to experiment, play with fire.

It was not easy to evade my housekeepers, my house's security detail. But I could sometimes escape off into the edges of our estate, dash through the hedges and topiaries and find my way to the far end of our property, past the pool, where there was a cut between the perimeter fence and the pool house.

There, I would play controlled burns with matches I swiped from the kitchen and burn old school textbooks and books I had stolen from Mother's library. I would stand still, wide-eyed, feeling all happy and mesmerized as the serrated teeth of small flames ate away at the crackling pages.

But I was caught on surveillance camera, and Father stalked and chased me through our house's winding hallways, up the double staircase.

Panting heavily, Father kicked and punched me, dragged me by the leg and picked me up and flung me like a sack of potatoes into my room and lashed me several times with his snakeskin belt. His bright blue eyes like gentian petals in a moonlit pool. His upper lip staying stiff as bone as he beseeched, cursed and beat me.

火火火火

Despite Father's admonishment, corporeal punishment, my urges remained. The desire to burn. To watch things burn.

The urge grew stronger, even, and I would dream of fires more vividly, and I planned and plotted to when I would be able to set fires again.

And often I would ideate padlocking Father in his office, gasoline to the double wooden doors and lighting his office on fire, thinking of him behind his colossal desk, his coughing and cavorting and his ivory dentures falling from his mouth.

His silk pants and his snakeskin belt and his golf clubs all aglow, smoldering, and me in a toga, running wildly through the halls of our house with a blowtorch, burning the Belgian millwork, burning the sculptures and French paintings he had bought at auctions, and shooting a fire hose filled with jet fuel along the exterior of the dwelling and burning the whole fucking house down, me watching it in flames from outside the front gates, then flogging myself with a fire hose to pat myself on the back...

I would think of burning alive anyone I hated. Teachers. Classmates. Janitors and school security guards most of all. Sitting in class, I would visualize how wonderful it would be if I could turn my pen into a flamethrower and incinerate everyone in the classroom. I would piss in a school bathroom's urinal and wish my dick were a flamethrower and that I could use it to piss fire and torch my whole school down to the ground.

The only classes I liked were math and science, especially science, because of the experiments and Bunsen burners...

Come high school, I grew to detest my classmates even more than the security guards and janitors. I hated the jocks and cool kids most. Particularly I started hating the cool kids' cigarette smoking, the scent it made. The way the smoke looked, and the way smokers looked.

It was so stupid, smoking. Smoke was so inferior. Its corpus simply an excreted byproduct of fire. The waste of fire. The shit of fire. And anyone I ever saw smoking cigarettes, like those cool kids who would sneak off behind school to suck cancer dicks, I would think of letting loose a flamethrower at them, cackling at the superiority of my flames over their smoke…

By the time I got my license to drive, Father was sleeping in his office at his firm's headquarters, and Mother was always off skiing wherever it was winter. Of an age to be left largely to my own devices and with the freedom of movement, at last, I had the freedom to play fire games again.

火火火火火

After school or on weekends, I would drive my Mercedes C-Class to a rundown part of town, where the black people used to live. That part of town had a surplus of abandoned buildings.

Since no one was around, it was easy to build small bonfires, watch and admire the flames.

But it was insufficient, the small bonfires. I wanted more, bigger brighter more colorful and extraordinary blazes. So, on Halloween, wearing an Obama mask, I filled a few gas cans and heaved and splashed them over an abandoned little 2-floor, single-family home, and set it alight.

Running off, watching from afar, it gave me a high like no other, seeing such a structure disintegrate and burn.

I revisited that area, torched a few other houses and a closed-down toy factory, the factory's joists and its smokestack collapsing under the weight of the lustrous flames, the ground shaking like an earthquake as it toppled, and I clapped and growled as the collapse sent a rush of blood to my head.

But I had to stop my activities around there, when it turned out a few squatters were inside one of the buildings I had burned. They had been homeless drug addicts and had burned to death. In all, there had been three of them.

At first, I did not think much of it, reading about it online. I was only slightly disappointed and annoyed that I would need to find a new area to play fires. However, when I saw their pictures, the drug addicts who perished, I was elated.

They were so ugly. Missing teeth. Covered in tattoos. One had a huge stupid red afro like Sideshow Bob. I could imagine the drug addicts in flames, coughing in conflagration. It was superb, envisioning the amber tongue of the fire licking over their diseased bodies, charring and cleaning them of their wasted lives… I felt so warm and fuzzy that I jumped up from my chair and danced the Dougie.

I knew what my next game would be…

火火火火火火

A week or so later, I set off at night. Drove down to Skid Row. I had taken precautions, had tinted my license plate, dressed in all black and disguised my face with makeup, wore a stocking cap and kept a loaded handgun in my coat pocket.

I stopped my car when I spotted a homeless man, sleeping rough on an empty side street.

I got out carrying a gas cannister and smelled a distinct odor of piss as I crept towards him on my tippy toes. I mechanically emptied the cannister, pouring the noxious liquid over him, then set the cannister down on the pavement. As he grumbled and shook awake, I lit and dropped a paper matchbook onto him, and I gasped in amazement as he combusted.

He flailed his limbs, writhing on the sidewalk, making flame angels and screaming in measured, high-pitched squeals as he, the old, bearded Ernest Hemingway looking homeless man, was hugged into a cocoon of fire.

My penis became big. Looking about, there was no one close, so I reached into my pants, and smelling at the astringent odor of burning hair and flesh. Watching the beauty of the hot dancing flames, I licked my lips and pulled on my cock and came into my X-Men boxers after only a few strokes, I was so excited!

Then I grabbed up the cannister, ran back to my Benz and peeled out, riding off feeling like a god!

This became my modus operandi. Sneak down to Skid Row in the cloak of night, find lone homeless, douse and burn them, and masturbate as they flopped, screamed, burned, and expired.

Twice the homeless stumbled up to their feet and took off running. One ran away, turned a corner. I do not know where he went. The other ran rather fast; way faster than I would expect of a bum. He got almost halfway down the street before he crumpled and faceplanted to the pavement.

It was a laugh riot, too, watching the bum, in flames, running away, slapping at himself, and eventually falling to the ground, flapping the last bit of life from his arms like a duck that had been shot.

火火火火火火火

I had expected to find accounts of my activities in the news but did not find anything. I was disappointed. As fun as it was, I wanted recognition for my efforts.

Eventually it made the news, that 8 homeless persons had been burned alive. But no one really cared.

Still, a copper or two could be posted to the area, so I decided to halt my homeless fire fun for a bit, not wanting to go to jail.

The whole thing annoyed me, twofold, that I could not play cremation sport with the bums anymore and that it had gotten so little press coverage. Only a short mention on the local evening news and a tiny blurb on the bottom of the Fox News website! What the fuck?!

No respect! Arsonists are the Rodney Dangerfields of criminals.

No respect. You always hear of murderers, serial killers, mass shooters, mobsters, drug dealers, terrorists, monomaniacal dictators, and all that, but never arsonists.

Why is it that none of us have gotten famous? I guess we had Timothy McVeigh, but he was more of a bomber and a domestic terrorist, not really an arsonist, and he just sort of looked like an asshole. I preferred more random carnage than political violence, anyway.

I thought of ways to change the perception of arsonists. Get us more respect…

I thought of scoring Super Bowl tickets or World Series tickets and setting a fire there. A bucket of kerosene tossed at a star quarterback or coach, watching the jock ass jerkoffs flailing in flames.

I thought of my favorite comedian, Anthony Jeselnik, his comedy special: "Fire in the Maternity Ward," and how chaining in a fancy hospital in Beverly Hills or Aspen and setting a fire and scorching a bunch of squealing infants would surely amass worldwide attention.

But these were just fantasies. My career as an arsonist arrived at an end when life got in the way, and aside from masturbating to fire videos online, I stopped setting fires after the news broke about the burning of the bums.

I doubled down on my studies, and finished high school, made the honor roll, and joined the Young Republicans. I went to _____ University where I spent most of my time exploring the intricacies of managerial finance, horizontal mergers and economies of scale…

I did not start any fires all through college, except a handful of times, when at summer concert festivals, I walked about, concealing a zippo, and I snuck up behind dirty hippies and lit their long hair on fire. I did that once to a Rastafarian, too, at a concert, lit his dreadlocks on fire and ran off giggling.

Nowadays, for my fire fun fix, I post ads on Craigslist, escort sites. Plenty of women let me pay to have sex with them as I burn them, touching a small blue flame from a blowtorch to their backs as I fuck them from behind and the women bark, whimper and yelp while I fuck to fire footage on my high-definition television.

Burning prostitutes helps alleviate stressors, takes the edge off my mania and philia…

Mostly, though, these days I am in the firm's upper floor offices overlooking the park, my eyes affixed to balance sheets, tickers and charts on computer screens.

PARENTS GOT PISSED ON IN TIMES SQUARE

"They were in Times Square, for New Year's Eve."

"Never understood that, celebrating New Year's with all those strangers, standing in the cold, in a place so fucking crowded."

"And how did it happen?"

"I don't know… He just said his parents got pissed on by somebody."

"I assume it was a man."

"You never know."

“It was so clotted with people that the pisser probably couldn’t reach a bathroom, was stupid drunk, I’d guess.”

“It was New Year’s Eve…”

“I wonder how it went down. Did the guy whip it out and start shooting, like a deranged killer, wantonly spraying down everyone?”

“And packed in like sardines, there’d be nowhere to escape. You’d have to simply stand there and take it.”

“Nowhere to run. Some freak, unzips his fly, cock flailing in the night, pissing wildly, pissing all over you...”

“The pissing guy screaming like Rambo, all: “RAAAAAAHHH!!!”

“Nah, no way. I think it was that the guy couldn’t hold it, went in his pants and the parents were wetted by it.”

“Can’t imagine a person breaking out his dick, pointing and pissing at some random people.”

“I can. People do worse. Of all the tragedies that could befall you, it is low down on the list.”

“Don’t be too hasty to judge. Perhaps he was actually a good Samaritan. Like he scanned around, spared the others, spared the children.”

“Pissing on a child, that must be a sex offense. Chris Hanson shit…”

“Chris Hansen.”

“Hansen?”

“Hansen.”

“Marilyn Manson.”

“Isn’t Marilyn Manson dead?”

“No, Marilyn Manson is alive and pissing on people in Times Square.”

“Marilyn Manson is pissing on children.”

“It has to be a sex offense, pissing on children...”

“Even by accident? Say you’re in a public bathroom, pissing in a urinal, and a crazy kid comes running in, accidentally runs into your stream, and you blast his snotty

little face with your golden bladder juice. Fucking next thing you know, you're in jail, getting shanked, getting your cheeks busted by a tatted-up Aryan Brotherhood gang member. Fuck…"

"I'm using the stall from now on..."

"Or did the piss originate from above? A balcony shooter. A roof shooter."

"The Oswald of Piss…"

"A second shooter theory. One from nearby and one from above."

"Dude's parents had enemies…"

"Magic piss. Ricocheting."

"A rooftop pisser, a sniper. Like someone at a crowded party, couldn't make it to the bathroom, relieved himself off a roof. Did it innocently enough. Thought he'd hit a dumpster or some shit, accidentally sprayed dude's parents."

"You really think it was incidental?"

"Accidental. It was an accident. I want to believe that. It helps me maintain faith in humanity."

"What'd they do afterwards?"

"Who? The pisser?"

"No, the parents…"

"After what?"

"After they got pissed on..."

"Not sure. It's an awkward conversation to have…"

"Piss must have frozen on them."

"Icicles of piss, crinkling off them…"

"I'd punch a motherfucker in the dick if he pissed on me."

"But what if it was Shaq? Bet he'd piss like a fire hose. Has special toilets installed in his house."

"I'd save the piss, the Shaq Piss. Sell it on eBay."

"Still don't understand. How does anyone get pissed on in Times Square?"

“Why does anyone go there for New Year’s Eve?”

“Dude’s parents probably won’t go back for New Year’s again.”

“And if they do, they’d deserve to be pissed on…”

WE WERE FAGS

I was a fag. So were all my friends back in middle school.

Only one or two of us were bi or gay. But to everyone else in the school, we were fags. Every single one of us. And we didn’t give a fuck.

It was true Darwin, our middle school. 1990s suburban America. It was animal. Social selection. There’d be regular ass-kickings. Kids in the hallways kicked, punched from behind. Group beatings in bathrooms. Faces in toilets. Faces slammed into lockers. Wedgies. Purple nurples. Ears flicked. Seats yanked out.

We rarely participated in such barbarism or fought or picked on others, but we would fight back when necessary, and we'd mostly lose, catch a beatdown.

Because we were fags.

Spazzes. Weirdos. Kids with fucked up haircuts, kids who wore out of fashion clothes, shopped at Goodwill stores and changed clothes when our clothes somehow became in fashion.

We were fags.

We read tattered secondhand sci-fi books, horror books by Stephen King, and we wrote shitty poetry, graffitied dicks and balls, tags, band names and haikus on bathroom stalls and played in shitty basement bands full of out-of-tune, distorted guitars, off-tempo drumming and shrieking tone-deaf vocals; our punk covers so horrendous they'd make Kurt Cobain want to shoot himself again.

Fags.

This was before school shootings, mass shootings were a regular occurrence.

Probably one or two of us would have shot people, given the chance, like probably that balding asshole, beer gut vice principal or the burning breath teacher who verbally abused us, turned his back on the bullying.

Or maybe we'd have blasted a jock or two, shot up a football or basketball game, if we had the opportunity, had the idea, but it didn't really register as a thing back then.

Like, why would we? We'd rather hang at home, smoke weed, strum guitars, and play video games, shoot people in video games.

At least in video games you can shoot people and not have to go get beaten and buttfucked in jail, or not have to shoot yourself afterwards.

Plus, you can hit the reset button, play a new game and keep shooting people… Video games are infinitely better…

And you might be thinking that we never got laid because we were fags. But we did. Maybe because even the shittiest garage and basement bands attract groupies. Maybe because girls liked “bad boys” and weirdos.

All of us had sex at young ages, but the girls we fucked weren’t cheerleaders, but were also fags, girl fags, girl versions of fags, girl weirdos and potheads. Girls with limps. Girls with big tits but small asses. Girls with small tits and big asses. Girls with speech impediments. Girls who wrote poetry and cut themselves.

Almost every girl we knew had been attacked or raped by the jocks. The jocks were always raping people, sexually harassing girls. One girl with big tits, at her old school, had a running back after her, constantly cornering her, ordering her to show him her tits and finally the running back tried to tear off her shirt in the hallway.

And he got away with it too, because he and his parents complained of racism and because he could play football…

The majority of the jocks’ sexual attacks happened at parties, usually to a girl drunk on a sofa, getting raped and Bill Cosby shit.

In retrospect, the jocks probably deserved some kinder, gentler, more anodyne version of Columbine, like maybe getting blasted with paintball guns or tasers or mace instead of bullets. They were rapists, the jocks, after all, and not disputable, questionable rapists like Kobe Bryant, but real Harvey Weinstein rapists, and serial date rapists allowed to rape because they excelled at sports.

That’s how it was.

They were the jocks.

And we were the fags...

...

The biggest fag of us all was Lenard.

Literally, he was big, 6’9 in 8th grade. He was a German American, who was that sort of special German, northern European, Aryan caveman mix of fat and muscle and stout, Alpine snow-white skin, crystal blue eyes.

Lenard could have been one of our enemies, he could have been a jock, he could have been one of them, if not for his personality.

He was too laid back. Sensitive. Liked to read big bulky brick-sized books like *Shogun* and listen to The Cure and Depeche Mode and didn't care much for aggressive hip hop or popularity or the latest clothes, fashions, trends. And he didn't have a fade or a flattop. Instead he had shoulder length dark wispy hair, parted down the middle, mutton chop sideburns and wore solid black shirts and jeans and heavy, murky eye liner.

That's why he fit in with us. Because we were the same. We freaks, posers, nerds, romantics and misfits. We formed a union, were a conglomeration of fags.

Aside from Lenard, none of us were physical specimens. We were short, chunky, uncoordinated, skinny, zit-faced. And definitely none of us could have been, like, maybe a pro athlete, except for Lenard. He could have. He certainly had the physical build.

He was the only one of us who wasn't bullied, beaten on by the jocks, and when he was with us, in the cafeteria, wherever, the jocks stayed away. Given his intimidating size, they wanted no part of him.

That changed, though, in gym class. Like us, Lenard wouldn't regularly participate and would sneak off with the rest of us fags, running off into the woods behind school, like escaped convicts, to smoke cigarettes and sip on alcohol stolen from someone's parents.

But, and I don't know why, he finally decided to join a basketball game in gym class and, perhaps out of a sense of obligation, we joined him on the court, forming a team of freaks and fags and we were matched up against the jocks.

Of course the jocks ran us ragged. But not Lenard.

We just threw the ball to him, and he'd chuck it right over them, dunked several times. I think he'd played basketball before at the school he'd transferred in from, because the game came easy to him, and he moved way swifter than I'd expect of a dude his size, all juking and jiving, dancing with grace, almost like a ballerina.

One of the jocks, also tall, but still shorter than Lenard, this crew cut, brace face fuck, named Allen, didn't appreciate being shown up, didn't like being dunked on by a ponytailed sasquatch of a fag. Especially one wearing eye liner…

Following Lenard's second effortless dunk over Allen, and the ball inadvertently hitting Allen upside the corner of his head, Allen barked curses and shoved Lenard and challenged him to a fight, not there, on the court, but said how Lenard had to meet him after school, at the track, behind the bleachers...

3:45 PM.

Lenard pushed him back, knocking Allen off balance, and responded laconically, "I'm there!" and stalked off…

...

I hated Allen. We all did. He'd been a fag before, two years prior, played drums for one of our shitty bands, and was fucking awesome, was like a taller, younger Lars, but when he'd hit puberty, he metamorphosized into an asshole. A jock. He'd joined the dark side.

Still, as much as I disliked him, part of me worried for him. With his brace face, he shouldn't have been fighting, and certainly shouldn't be trying to fight a gorilla like Lenard. I figured Lenard would bash open his face and I could envision the metal wires of Allen's braces mangled, his face a bloody car wreck, or maybe Lenard might just rip him limb by limb.

That challenge, that gym class, was in the morning, and after that, the rest of the day, we didn't mention it, talk about it, but we all knew it would happen. It was a tacit understanding. It was inevitable.

I think we fags were quite looking forward to it, on some level, seeing a fag fucking rock asshole Allen. Allen, that piece of shit, that traitor, that Benedict Arnold. Fucking Darth Vader.

Lenard, our Luke, and like 5 of us fags skipped the 7th and final period, smoked weed in the woods, and debated what was better, the horror movie "Carrie" or its book. Then we walked over to the bleachers for the fight.

Lenard was unnaturally calm; his eyes crimson; his face dark as a cave.

The rest of us, while sky high, were amped up. Two of us had mace; one had a bottle of hairspray he stole from a girl's locker, which he paired with a lighter, to create a makeshift flamethrower, and I had a can of insect repellent ready. All this in case the other jocks jumped us.

We were flanked to the side by a short hairy Greek kid who whistled and mockingly sang "Don't Worry, Be Happy" clapping and slapping rhythmically on his thighs and chest. It was our best attempt at drums of war.

...

When we got there, Allen stood at the ready, 6 or 7 big burly jocks to his rear, reinforcing him, clustered shoulder to shoulder. A parabola of smirking dickheads.

As we stepped under the shadow of the bleachers, away from the amber afternoon, Allen shoved Lenard, hard, and yelled, "Let's go, bitch!"

Lenard stood stolidly.

WHAP! Allen pushed Lenard again, this time harder, the sound like a muffled gun shot. But Lenard didn't buckle. Not one bit.

Lenard, barely moving, did nothing, stood and stared blankly at Allen.

Then Lenard's skin shifted. It was as if he'd been hit with a bucket of ice. He went pale as a ghost and spoke, meekly, "I don't want to fight you."

Allen, confused, forehead furrowed, eyes narrowed, replied, "What? Come on, don't be a fucking pussy!"

Lenard's red eyes got glassy; his voice cracking, he muttered, "No, I don't want to," and a single tear slid down his cheek.

Allen turned to his friends, the ensemble of assholes, who looked bewildered. A chubby black kid in a baggy FUBU shirt shook his head and shrugged his shoulders wordlessly.

"I'm going to fuck you up!" screamed Allen, as he swung back towards Lenard and crept up, got mere inches away from Lenard's grill, on him like a drill instructor.

Lenard stood sucking his cheeks. Began to shed more tears.

“I’ll fucking kick your ASS!” threatened Allen, his voice seesawing, and he’d stressed that syllable in “ass” with a prophetic intensity.

Allen feinted, mocked a right cross at Lenard. Lenard didn’t flinch, just stood, ten toes on the ground. Despite the tears, he was impassive. The tears seemed more mechanical than hot.

Allen tilted his head, jutting out his square jaw, and peered over at his crew. Some were chuckling. Some were whispering to each other. The chubby kid again shrugged his shoulders.

“Alright then, if you don’t want to fight, drop to your knees and kiss my shoe,” commanded Allen, pointing to his shiny white and purple, puffy Reebok Pumps.

“And you’ll leave me alone?” asked Lenard, unwavering, though his voice taking on a more hopeful, higher register.

“Yup. Kiss it.” Allen affirmed, still pointing to his right foot, that 100 something dollar shoe.

Lenard dropped down, his gigantic frame folding, and got on his knees, like a dog, crouched and smooched the shoe, the kiss touching the toe vamp, and then slowly rose back up.

“Oh my God!” cried one of the jocks, as they broke into hysterical, cackling laughter.

“Ugh…” scoffed Allen, who waved a hand in Lenard’s direction like he was swatting a fly, and he shook his head at his crew, in dismay and disgust, and they all, at once, clotted together and sauntered off hooting and hollering, the fucking pack of wolves, and one of them screamed “fags!” at us.

Lenard wiped his nose with his forearm and began to walk off in the other direction. His face bore no hint of emotion.

The rest of us looked at each other, unsure what to say. Lenard went off towards the woods, alone, and none of us followed him. The rest of us retreated to a parent-free home, ripped bong hits in the basement and played Street Fighter. We didn't talk much about what'd gone down, aside from one of us, violet mohawk Mike, who pontificated, like, "Dude, I don't know why he didn't fight. He's much bigger. He could have fucking killed Allen if he wanted."

I can't remember who, but someone replied, "He's like the white Gandhi." And that was the last we mentioned it.

Looking back, if it'd happened today, I'm sure it'd been filmed by a cellphone, had made its way onto social media, likely gone viral. Yet another reason I'm happy to have not grown up with aspects of today's Black Mirror, tech-topia bullshit…

The next day, Lenard showed up to school in a mocha brown trench coat. He'd been quiet, and he looked different, like he was older, and he was paler, white as a bone. We'd smoked a morning cigarette with him, but he hadn't spoken, and had kept his head tossed back, his gaze at the milky morning sky. We weren't sure what to say to him.

Later that morning, before gym class, Lenard was in the locker room, getting dressed, and a skinny kid walked by, a kid who was with another crew of losers, idiots always running around the hallways, playing "YOU ARE IT!" tag games. This loser had these funny Alfred Neuman ears that always got flicked or pulled on by jocks, and Big Ears walked by Lenard, snickering, and said something about "Hey, kiss my shoe!"

Lenard spun around, grabbed a fistful of the kid's sandy blond hair, a big clump fixed at the root. Lenard cocked his huge right arm up in the air, in the shape of a C. Big Ears also had braces, and I anticipated blood, massive amounts, about to be spilled.

But Lenard drew down his balled fist. Lightly pushed Big Ears away. Big Ears, terror of God on his face, clasped a trembling hand onto his ruffled hair and scampered off.

Lenard, who'd been changing into his gym clothes, instead got back into his street clothes, and coolly left the locker room…

...

That night the police showed up to my house.

From my bedroom window, I saw the cops, in two squad cars, pulling into my driveway, blue and red lights flashing, but no sirens. I quickly snatched a bag of weed from my desk, ran to the bathroom and flushed it down the toilet.

A minute or two later, a clapping knock on my door.

Opening the door, my asshole older brother, in his clean white Duke sweatshirt and sweatpants, stood smiling in the threshold. Lips barely moving through his shit-eating grin, he snorted and said, "Hey faggot, the fucking cops are here for you."

Walking downstairs, I pondered what had brought them. It could have been any number of things, but I suspected it was about drugs.

Three of the cops were in navy blue uniforms, perfectly creased, with shiny badges that glowed in the vestibule's buttery glare. One of them, a slightly older, a late middle-aged, Fred Dreyfus looking fuck, wore a well-tailored, wolf gray pin-striped 3-piece suit. They all looked serious, had angry, hornet faces, and all of them rested their hands on their belts or hips. One of them smelled strongly of Brut aftershave.

The cop in the wolf suit stepped forward, spoke from underneath his bushy mustache, and said solemnly that Lenard had stolen his dad's shotgun and killed himself and asked me what I knew about it.

HURT PEOPLE HURT PEOPLE

The year was 1991. It was a hot and sticky summer day, and I was a young teen, in a record store, flipping through a CD rack.

This was during my delinquency, and I had a case of the sticky fingers.

Holding a Faith No More CD, like a talisman, I was ready to slip it into my Hurricanes hoodie pocket, when I noticed that across from me, in the opposite aisle, stood an older boy, who was sneering and stink-eying me.

It was as if he knew, was reading my movements. He knew I was about to steal the CD. Maybe he works for the store, I thought, and I glared back at him, our gazes locked for an uncomfortable 5 or so seconds, neither of us blinking, until I lost the staring contest, giggled and smiled, and slipped the CD back into its place, peered away and continued to peruse.

Figuring the store's security was onto me, I resisted the urge to lift anything and soon left empty-handed. Then I went over to a vending machine to buy a Snickers.

As I finished feeding coins into the machine's slot, I felt a fist collide with my face.

BAP!

Shit…

It wasn't too hard a punch, but it was strong enough to knock me off balance, fuck up my equilibrium.

Stumbling forward, the vending machine interrupted the force of my fall, and I smacked into it with my shoulder, before regaining my footing. I then spun around to see the boy from the record store, who was now flanked by another older boy. This one missing half a front tooth.

Both boys had crew cuts and wore baggy clothing and generally looked like people who either had been in jail, or probably should be in jail...

The uncouth pair cut striking figures. Their faces twisted masses of anger and rage. To my young eyes they appeared scary as ghouls…

“Why you staring? You wanna fight? You pussy!” the record store ruffian seethed, his arms spread like a T; his words seemingly exploding from his flapping, chapped lips, flecks of spittle launching as he spoke.

I shook my head, indicating negative. I didn’t want to fight. Especially not two of them.

I had an older brother, roughly their size, who’d beat me, regularly. But two boys my brother’s size, that’d been far worse. Plus, these dudes looked way tougher than my brother, even at his most savage.

Cornered to the vending machine, the snaggletooth shoved me, hard, pain stinging up my spine as it clapped at the plexiglass casing.

After shoving me, snaggletooth stepped back, possibly expecting a retaliatory strike. But I took it as a cue to bolt out of there. And I did.

But the barbarians gave chase, and we went dashing across the mezzanine floor of the mall. Running for my life, I barreled down an escalator, to the first floor, where I luckily saw a group of my friends at the food court, scarfing burgers and fries, drinking cokes.

I ran over to them; it was five of us, and I figured we’d gang up, form a united front. They’d help me, for sure, right?

Wrong.

When I sprinted up to them, they eyed me curiously. Then the ruffians stormed in. And instead of just fucking with me, the philistines took turns fucking with all of us. One by one. Shoving us. Calling us names. They even stole and smashed one of my friends’ glasses, plucking them off his face and stomping them into the floor.

None of us were brave enough to stand up for ourselves. Our attackers were too tall, too big, and too scary. My friend whose glasses they smashed started crying.

One of the ruffians said they were Brazilians and that they thought Americans were tough and were shocked to see us being such pussies.

I have to say I felt like shit, for not standing up to them, for not standing up for my country, but also, I felt awful for unleashing these demons on my friends. And deep down, I was wishing like anything that I had a weapon, a gun to shoot them

with, or that I knew how to fight like Chuck Norris, so I could have smashed their ugly, fucking snaggletooth faces in.

But unfortunately, I didn't have a weapon, and it wasn't an action movie.

The ghouls continued to follow us around the mall, tormenting us, until we passed a shoe store, where inside I saw an older kid, working there, a guy who lived down the street from me, an aspiring pro basketball player, who I played ball with a few times, and who was cool, had given me tips on my jumper.

While the ghouls fucked with my friends, I slipped away, snuck into the store, and my neighbor met me at the door, easily saw I was upset. I told him what was going on, pointed out the ghouls to him.

Seeing the situation, from the store display window, and eying the size discrepancy, the brows on my neighbor's simian skull furrowed and his upper lip curled. He whistled and called over his equally imposing walking tree of a coworker, and they stepped out with me, to have a word with the ghouls.

The ghouls, seeing the basketball players sauntering over, lifting their heads up at stronger taller kids than themselves, backed down, stepped off, quickly, and one of them pointed at me and blurted out, sanctimoniously, in his heavy South American accent, "He was going to steal!"

"So you're a pussy and a snitch?!" shot back one of the basketball players, feinting a step forward at the ruffians, and the two flinched, their faces blanched, and they ran off like rats.

I knew the basketball player was talking to the bullies. But I must admit that I felt the same way about myself. Like a pussy and a snitch.

I really felt low after that. Like a total bitch. Maybe it'd been better to have taken the beating.

My friends and I went and sat back down to the food court. I'm not sure what we did. I'm sure if this was now, we'd have been on phones. What did people do or talk about before smartphones? I can't remember.

But I do remember my friend whose glasses got smashed said he wanted to find some kids to go do that same thing to. And it made me wonder who'd done that to those boys who'd fucked with us.

PUNK ROCK GIRL

I'd just come home from the morgue.

I've been setting my shoes on fire and running through traffic again.

I shot my charred, pumped-up kicks, like a Knicks basketball, into a roving robot dumpster. Then I delivered the ransom note, along with my keys, to the police, via carrier pigeon drone.

Climbing the fire escape, I punched in the window to my floor and crept in…

Cackling, I crawled on my belly, jumped up and kicked open the door to my apartment. Once inside, I spotted a crinkled-up baby blue maxi pad on the parquet floor.

Purling steam, it was lying smack-dab in a puddle of cherry red blood.

Being a single guy, living alone, I can say for sure that it was not mine.

The window was open too, and I'm guessing that however it got there, it came from whoever or whatever had opened the window. I seem to remember my apartment not having windows, either...

So I slipped out of my gorilla suit. Got naked and turned on the TV using my Ouija board app.

All that night, I didn't dare touch the maxi pad. I just let it lay on the parquet.

Not that I could avoid it, though. I live in a shoebox-size studio apartment. So I tiptoed, danced, and circled it, nervous it might come to life, like little legs, arms or wings or things suddenly sprouting out. The maxi pad flying all about, like a drone, in kamikaze circles, stinging worse than a hornet and shooting laser death beams.

Panic-stricken, my dick thickened, and I dove into my mattress made of butt-shaped cushions. Then I clammed up and cowered under my Dallas Cowboys blanket, shaking in horror and praying for God.

And God said no, through silence. And the maxi pad did nothing. It remained in place. It didn't sing or tap-dance, either and I spent most of the night in bed, in a fetal position, attempting to move the maxi pad via telekinesis. Occasionally, I'd poke my head up, cautiously, from under the covers, and see if the maxi pad was still there. And it was.

It was like me and the maxi pad were twin corpses.

But when I woke up in the morning, the maxi pad had vanished. The window was gone too.

Today I jumped off the roof of a burning skyscraper wearing a jetpack.

And when I hurried home from the morgue, I was wondering what would be in my apartment this time. And I received quite the shock, when I pulled open the plywood over my door, which squeaked as it'd never done before, sounding more as if it were a cat in heat.

In my apartment, I saw a punk rock girl, seated on my floor, where the maxi pad was last night. She was cross-legged, in a Buddha pose, and it turned out that it was her making those cat in heat sounds. Her meowing so high-pitched that I couldn't believe it'd come from a human.

Her head was spinning in 360-degree circles. Until it wasn't. Then she fused her gaze to mine, curled her thin lips into a heart-shaped smile, and shrieked at me in a voice that sounded sped up, "I want to be a bitch to you."

There was a bloody kitchen knife lying next to her left knee. So who was I to refuse...

Punk rock girl was pale as a pain pill and frail, fucking rail thin. She had a small head and slithery green snakes for hair, like Medusa. Her unblinking fox eyes were the fucking size of golf balls. With no pupils. Her eyes white as sugar. And she had heavy rouge eyeshadow the color of roses, slathered in hefty heaps, almost melting into her skull.

A matching pair of parallel, apple size, black pentagrams were crudely tattooed on her cheeks and a 3-centimeter inverted crucifix with an upside-down Jesus stick figure had been tatted into the center of her forehead.

I could see her smile dissolve into a frown and then her blackened lips started shivering. I keep my house hot and humid, at about 90 degrees, so this was odd.

But she was shivering. Hard. So fucking hard it was rattling her metal face. Her face full of more piercings than I'd ever seen. Her eyebrows, lips, ears, cheeks, nose, stabbed and hooked and carved into a solar system of sparkly metal hoops, beads and studs.

Hot damn, I liked her duds...

Punk rock girl wore a skimpy jet-black miniskirt, with no panties, and I could see her bald cunt. Her cunt had no slit and looked as if it were the tip of Joe Rogan's head.

She wore no bra either, and I could see her big round tits and stiff and thick pointy pink nipples sticking out from underneath her tight tattered black and white striped Jeffrey Dahmer fan club t-shirt.

I wanted to tell her my uncle dated Dahmer's mother, back in high school.

But I somehow thought, intuited, that punk rock girl already knew this.

Punk rock girl refused my invitation to supper. She then levitated up to the ceiling, clung and crawled on it, like an insect. "I want to be a bitch to you," she reiterated, this time in a softer, damn near sultry coo. "Please, let me be a bitch…"

Punk rock girl stayed glued to the ceiling and whispered Sylvia Plath poetry to me via telepathy as I ate spaghetti and watched the news from Hong Kong. When I was washing the dishes, she wailed, hysterically, that I couldn't flush the toilet anymore. No matter what. Don't flush the toilet. Just put the lid down.

Just put the FUCKING lid down!

Okay, who am I to refuse.

I killed that night clutching punk rock girl's kitchen knife, mimicking throat-slashing motions and fencing maneuvers. Punk rock girl mumbled, from the ceiling, if it was possible to extract a kidney using a kitchen knife, or with telekinesis, and I prognosticated that someone had probably done it. If not here, like in Cambodia. Or Austria. A Nazi doctor or a dude who was in the Khmer Rouge or some shit.

Flitting an eye up to the ceiling, I stuck my tongue out at the purring punk rock girl, whose body was vibrating and spinning in circles like a ceiling fan.

I woke up early next morning, screaming myself hoarse. Of course, I wasn't sure if I'd been dreaming, but I'd been picturing punk rock girl shrunk to the size of a Lilliputian. She was naked, with a reflector helmet, ready to go caving up into my

urethra. “You’re fucking evil!” I bellowed, as I bounced out of bed, ducked into a defensive crouch, and jerked my genitals through my legs, petrified the punk rock girl was preparing to pounce.

But she was gone. No trace of her.

My “Macarena” alarm tone blaring, I wiped away crocodile tears and concentrated on the coronavirus, poison gas attacks, fetus soup and shark fin restaurants.

Walking backwards, into the bathroom, I pirouetted and preemptively peered at the toilet, which was speckled with blood and smelled of vomit. A neon green cobra splashed up from out of the bowl, hissed and flicked its forked tongue and flared its hood. Then it dove into the piss-yellow water, sloshed, and slipped down the drain.

All the same, I still did my business, and, out of respect for punk rock girl’s wishes, I didn’t flush and simply put down the lid.

I did a headstand and walked on my hands, emerging from the bathroom to spot a bloody kidney, warm and slick and flopping like a baby seal on the floor. I flipped to my feet, then scooped the kidney up, cradled it in my arms, as if it were a baby. I sang it a French lullaby, snapped a selfie with it, and tenderly bundled the kidney into my Dallas Cowboys blanket and fed it to the freezer. Then I placed an ad on Amazon.

After I washed up, in the kitchen sink, I zipped on my gorilla suit, and kicked open my door, and ran, as fast as I could, to the morgue, blasting Enya in my earbuds.

When I got to the morgue, I found our first client of the day, on a metal slab, her face in a painted death smile. Her gray eyes were open wide and looked like shucked oysters.

“Green hair, a real weirdo,” sang Gucci, from behind the computer...

“The cops said she cut out her kidney and bled to death during a Dark Web livestream…”

THE RIGHT PRIVILEGE

They were a cross between rednecks and hippies. It was an unusual dichotomy, how they listened to The Grateful Dead and smoked weed yet also liked NASCAR and shooting things. How they were into both Jesus and casual sex.

One of them preached that sodomy is righteous and cool with Jesus because it prevents abortions.

The pair had good drugs. The kindest buds, sometimes LSD, shrooms, and coke. But mostly they just drank and smoked weed.

They were my neighbors, lived across the street, on the upper floor of a subdivided house.

Whenever you walked by their apartment, you'd smell the pungent aroma, the fragrance of funky weed. And you'd almost instantly catch a contact high whenever you'd walk inside their place. Their place fucking plastered in trippy psychedelic posters and Dead memorabilia.

There'd always be plenty of perpetually stoned stoners on the twin couches in their living room; stoners burning joints, ripping bong hits, while video games or videos of 60s concerts or Cheech & Chong flicks played on the big screen TV.

Weed was illegal, sure, but almost everyone in that neighborhood smoked, even another one of our neighbors- who was a cop.

That neighbor, the cop, was musclebound, had lots of tattoos and a porn-stache, and he'd come by to smoke weed with us, sometimes knocking on the door, yelling "police" jokingly, and sometimes bringing a couple of other cops, in uniform, over to burn.

So, yeah, seeing as we smoked weed with some of the local cops, we didn't worry too much about getting busted.

Shit, we'd hardly ever even get pulled over. You'd have to be driving really badly, like a total fucktard, to get pulled over. And even then, the cops would just take your keys, give you a ride home. Unless you were an asshole to them, talked shit. Then they'd definitely arrest your fucked up, drunk ass. Make you spend the night in the slammer.

But usually, the cops left us alone. Or were plain nice, smiled and chatted with folks at the diner. I guess the cops had greater issues on the other side of town. That's where the violent crime was. But strangely, though most of the murders and shootings were there, and cops patrolled the area a lot, still, I heard from a classmate who lived there that if you called the cops, they might not show up for an hour.

In our neighborhood, though, if you called the cops, even for stuff like a snake in the grass or a housecat stuck up in a tree, the cops would be there in a heartbeat…

I grew up nearby, and there was one time when I was a snotnose kid, riding my bike, and I saw a grown man crawling in through the first-floor window of a neighbor's house. He didn't look like Santa Claus, and I freaked out, furiously peddled home, ran inside, called 911. After reporting the crime, the lady who answered 911 asked me if the man was Caucasian, and I didn't know what that was. "Was he white?" she asked, sounding annoyed. I wasn't sure why she'd cared to know that, but I remembered he was.

He was a fat white guy, a hairy gorilla looking fuck, and his ass crack was hanging from his pants, like a plumber, as he shimmied in through that window… I didn't say he was a gorilla or tell her about the ass crack, though…

Mere minutes later, I remember several squad cars came reeeeaaah-reeeeeee-aah reeing in, and a helicopter hovered in from the heavens and sounded warbled police things… Turns out the hairy window guy was a dude who'd been renting the house. He'd just been locked out… Dude must have been shitting bricks when the coppers roared in like that. Bet the motherfucker called a locksmith next time…

Back to what I was talking about before… We didn't venture into that other neighborhood much, except a couple of times to buy drugs. Other than that, there wasn't much reason to go there. And if you did go over there, sometimes you'd be stopped on the street by one of the locals, usually an older man, usually an older man with lots of facial hair and bushy eyebrows and a concerned gaze, and he'd kindly but firmly let you know that you were "in the wrong part of town."

Besides looking for drugs, more people from my neighborhood started going over there, though, when a nightclub opened in that part of town.

My neighbors' cousin's boyfriend was a part-owner of the club, and he said over bong hits that they had gotten a lease on the land for a bargain, and he'd kindly invited us over, gifted us free VIP passes.

He said the land had formerly been public housing, which had been torn down to pave the way for an entertainment district, featuring nightclubs. The development developed in hopes of attracting more affluent visitors to the area…

I'd seen a report about it on the local news. The development being criticized by locals. One of them was this tall round-shouldered deacon with big puffy white hair hanging like a snowball atop his head. He had on this shiny black suit that looked made of plastic and these eyes that appeared glazed, and the deacon was animated as he was saying, in a raspy hiss, something about this being the beginning of a gentrification drive…

My neighbors' cousin's boyfriend's club spun mostly electronic music. Next door was another club that played hip-hop.

I was surprised that my neighbors liked electronic music, because they usually listened to The Grateful Dead and other 60s music, but they said they wanted to have a look at the club, dance and party there.

I was game. I liked all types of music. And still do. And I liked getting fucked up and partying. And still do, sometimes.

The night we were to visit the club, we warmed up before we left, and sank a few shots of tequila, ripped a series of bong hits of some super strong sticky-icky

stinky skunk Sativa. We were all pretty fried when we set out to drive over to the club.

As we began our journey, the weather, which had been its normal fall crisp and cool, transformed, like instantaneously. The night grew even darker and then erupted into an angry fit of hail, rat-a-tat-tatting on my neighbor's station wagon's windshield as we pulled onto the highway.

The rain then started falling in sheets. Like a damn hurricane. I could barely see the lines in the road. Everything was just dark and liquid, dark water, as if we were in a boat, in a jungle, in a monsoon, sloshing through a murky river at nighttime.

But my friend, the hippy, looked so serene behind the wheel. He was in the zone. Hyper-focused. With his ponytail and beard, in the silvery lighting of the car, he sorta reminded me of Jesus.

Big scary semi-trucks barreled past us at breakneck speeds, sending waves and splashes and crashes of water whooshing at our vehicle. But dammit, that Subaru didn't budge. And with Jesus behind the wheel, we rode straight and steady, making it to our destination safely. The rainstorm petering out shortly before we reached the offramp.

However, after Mother Nature relented, Human Nature stepped up to the plate, and we found ourselves in quite the pickle.

As we neared the glittery lights of the club, we rode into the middle of what looked like a riot.

The traffic out front of the complex was backed up for about a block. And there was what appeared to be people that came from a hip-hop video hanging out of their car windows, sunroofs, the hip-hopping people with contorted, scowling and grimacing expressions, and they were gesticulating wildly, throwing up all sorts of hand and finger signs.

I'm pretty sure they weren't deaf people, using sign language, but being as baked as I was, that's what I first thought, “Like, dude, why are all these deaf people so pissed off…" Then, however, because I'd watched so many hip-hop videos, I came to believe it might have been a gang thing.

Then we saw there were people in the road, who'd left their cars, or who'd sprinted over from the parking lot of the club complex. They looked pissed off too.

The hip-hopping people in the street were yelling, posturing, doing sign language, and a few were throwing hands, involved in fistfights.

A group of girls strode past our car. One caught my eye. She was the prettiest of the pack, tall and thin, with swirly waves of flowing yellowy hair, heavy makeup, and sparkly silver high heels; the girl in a short black dress that appeared as if she'd chosen it carefully.

The girls were walking hurriedly towards the clubs when another girl, from another pack, ran up on them. The insurgent, in a tight-fitting tiger-print one-piece mini, was about the same age, early 20s, but was far larger, damn near the size of a sumo, and she was screaming like a banshee. Rumbling up behind the flock of pretty girls, the insurgent, the sumo, the she-beast, let loose a shriek and struck the pretty girl I'd seen, in the back of the head, with a sharp rabbit punch.

To my surprise, the pretty girl took it like a champ. She only buckled, stumbled slightly, but kept walking, and hurried her pace.

The she-beast then howled and shouted a string of invective. The she-beast's battle cry elicited no response, though, from the pretty pack.

The cops, in several squad cars, roared in, their sirens sounding like animals.

The cops descended, some with guns drawn, some with shining flashlights, some spraying mace. The cops, screaming police things, began corralling and arresting the fighting sign language people.

Looking to my left, I saw there was a hippy, a guy from our neighborhood, who also sorta looked like Jesus, walking over to the club. One of the sign language people dashed over and accused that Jesus of "rolling his lips."

"Why you roll your lips at me?" shouted the seething sign language man, the angry youngster in dark baggy clothing. The angry young man's pants were hanging so low his entire ass was hanging out, his bright red boxers gleaming through the night, making him appear like a red-ass gremlin.

The hippy just shrugged, shook his head, meekly, stared at the ground and attempted to walk away. But the red-ass persisted. Inquired again, "Why you roll your lips at me?"

And after shoving the hippy, the red-ass launched a wild haymaker that connected squarely on the hippy's left cheek, sending the hippy tumbling to the pavement. The red-ass's nostrils flared, his neck veins popped, and he screamed epithets as he crouched and punched, rained fists at the fallen hippy, who'd curled into a ball on the ground. Then he kicked the hippy in the hippy's hairy head before the cops came and wrangled and handcuffed the attacker, the red-ass screaming and squirming spastically as he was whisked away.

The cops were now looking into every vehicle, beaming flashlights like lasers and dragging out drivers and occupants, searching people, arresting some. No one was doing sign language at the cops, but they all looked a lot angrier upon the cops' arrival. The cops looked angry too, and I saw a cop pepper spray a fat girl who'd been trying to flee.

The whole scene killed my buzz. I wasn't feeling too high anymore. And being that none of us could pass a breathalyzer test, plus the three of us were holding weed, I started to worry that maybe we'd get searched. We weren't in our neighborhood. I wasn't sure what could happen here.

But when the cops approached, shined the searchlight on us, they saw how panicked we were, and they gave us a look, a look not unlike the older men with bushy eyebrows, the look of them knowing that we were in the wrong place, and that they knew that we knew we were in the wrong place. The pair of cops, who looked like people from my neighborhood, looked away, tacitly, and waved us past, and the road in front of us had cleared, wide open as the Red Sea.

We then drove back to our neighborhood, disappointed to not have checked out the club. But happy to have gotten out of there unscathed. We never went back to that part of town, until it was further gentrified. Well, except maybe once or twice, to buy drugs.

ED SHEERAN FAN POLTERGEIST

1

Samantha had planned the perfect Halloween-themed bachelorette party for her friend, Kara.

She'd meticulously ironed out every detail. The nightclub. The restaurant. The food. Everything was in place.

It was all a welcome diversion. Seeing as the last year had been a living hell.

And that hell was due entirely to one person. Her ex-boyfriend, Colin.

2

They'd had a rocky relationship, Samantha and Colin. But it wasn't always like that. He'd been so charming when they met. That rainy afternoon when she'd lifted her gaze from her phone, stepped forward and literally bumped into him in line, at the front counter of that cute little café next to the modern art gallery. Little could she have guessed the charming, handsome stranger had a rollercoaster of moods, that he must have been bipolar or borderline. Maybe both...

When she met him, though, he was so cute and fun. He was a joker, a clown, a lovable goofball. Witty and full of laughs.

A professional artist by trade, he was a protean painter, spending most of his time in his home studio, painting these immaculate murals of mountains, the sea.

Oh, and he'd paint her too. As an angel. He'd summon a numinous force, a touch of God in his brush. Seriously. It was almost as if, at least to her, he was better than Di Vinci.

He'd be so enraptured in his art. The way he'd stand, wide-eyed at his easel, mesmerized, moving his whole body in concert with his brush, producing such jaw-dropping, lifelike portraits of her - usually portraits of her in the nude- renderings of her as a Greek goddess with fluttering, silky white wings and wavy black hair bouncing over her shoulders. Her feminine curves and contours, her creamy skin, the hourglass shape of her body portrayed to a heavenly perfection; in a way she'd never imagined possible.

Sweeping the brush, with rhythmic grace, he seemingly had a power as strong as the ocean. She'd blush red, posing and turning for him, smiling coyly, herself feeling as if she really was an angel, if only for that moment... Her heart melting, knees weakening when he'd whisper, repeatedly, from behind the easel, just how "exquisite, beautiful she is…"

If he wasn't painting, he'd be adorably eccentric, a lovable madman, dancing in his bedroom, playing air guitar, cranking classic rock (often AC/DC). Or he'd be shuffling feverishly about the house, a million miles an hour, cooking piles of pancakes, quoting Hemingway, and writing lists on his phone, planning daring trips to every part of the globe. Planning to try extreme sports, wild activities. African safaris, skydiving, lion taming, scuba-diving, parasailing, paragliding, bungee jumping. He'd even mentioned wanting to wrestle alligators! It was as if there was nothing he wouldn't try…

3

But then there was his other extreme, which, horrifically, she'd soon discover. His crash. His plummet. When he'd be down. And when he was down, it was rock bottom. He'd be irritable. Aloof. Hiding in bed, under a bubble of covers, catatonic, talking to no one, doing nothing. Going for days not touching his phone or even leaving the house. Pissing in empty Gatorade bottles he'd keep next to his bed.

And that was the best she could hope for when he was down. Often, he'd be worse. Like when he'd start fights, arguments over nothing.

He'd get so angry. One minute he'd be fine, everything going swimmingly. And then, POW! He'd explode. Like a bomb. Over nothing she'd done intentionally. It could be just how she crossed her legs in a restaurant. The tone of a text message. The choice of a song or brand of milk.

Really, any perceived slight he might regard as a mortal wound. Anything could make him flip out and start explosive arguments that she always feared would become physical. But they never did. He'd never lay a hand on her, never resort to violence.

Still, though, in her mind, the possibility existed that he could. It was the serial killer look that'd flicker in his sharp blue eyes. The way he'd scream at the top of his lungs, the guttural sound of his straining voice, his curly red fascist haircut flopping and moving like flames atop his skull as his lanky body jolted with rage.

Following a friendly joke she'd cracked about him liking Ed Sheeran, he'd blown his lid, jumped up from the couch and threw a glass at the wall, shattering it. Aghast, her expression twisted to one of fixed terror. And she sat curling to the corner of the couch, fearing that next time it'd be her thrown at the wall, her

spine splintering and cracking into pieces like the poor Picasso painting glass he'd just jumped up and flung with the fucking power of a baseball pitcher.

(The whole incident, too, really made her hate that "Shape of You" song even more, and in a whole new way…)

4

Eventually, they'd always make up after their fights, have a romp in bed, return to calm, civility. He'd apologize profusely to her. His eyes wet and his kind voice sweet as candy, ricocheting like a windchime in her ear.

When they'd fight over the phone, he'd later send her apologetic texts with loads of emojis, shower her with compliments and show up to her doorstep with a bouquet of roses, endearingly jutting out his bottom lip. Then he'd take her to a fancy French restaurant and ply her with wine and delicacies. Afterward, they'd Uber to his house, retire for the evening and let their full stomachs weigh them down onto the bed.

In bed, they'd lay supine, on satin sheets, in a tacit silence, staring into each other's eyes. Then they'd cavort under his heavy down feather blankets, before cuddling and kissing for hours. Everything would be bliss for at least a day or two-until his mood crashed again and the arguments resumed.

5

Finally, enough was enough. Samantha had tired of his cycles. She'd seen Kara and Kara's fiancé; how happy they were. Sure, the two had fights, but nothing like Samantha and Colin.

Samantha, at Kara's urging, decided to give Colin an ultimatum. Get mental help, get in therapy, get on the right meds, or they'd have to split up.

Colin didn't take well to Samantha's request. He took it personally. As an insult. Accused her of cheating on him, trying to find a way out of their relationship.

Samantha, while sitting next to Kara, in Kara's tiny apartment, sniffled and cried on the phone as Colin berated her. Kara, her pink hair in a tight bun, knitted her brows, and looped an arm over Samantha's shoulder, leaned in and listened to Colin's cursing, his shrieking voice, and then whispered to Samantha that they should call the police.

Samantha pursed her lips. Shook her head. She didn't need the cops. She could handle this herself. And so she drew in a deep breath and summoned the courage to end things, knowing Colin needed far greater help than she could offer. Like Kara had said, Samantha knew Colin would have to sort out his issues before he could have a successful relationship with her. Or anyone.

After telling Colin this, he yelled even louder, and for the first time, threatened to kill her. But she simply hung up. Then collapsed into Kara's arms, burst into a fit of hot tears.

But, later that dark, windy night, Samantha's sadness shifted to fright and her stomach churned.

She worried Colin would call back. Maybe show up to her apartment, with the most malevolent of intentions...

6

Eerily, though, she heard nothing from him. She worried he'd taken it too hard. Maybe had killed himself.

But then she remembered his guttural, sibilant screaming, how he'd threatened to kill her. And she started to become increasingly panicked.

What if he was serious? What if he showed up to her workplace, to her apartment?

Worse yet, he was rich. Not super-rich, but wealthy. A trust fund kid with ample financial resources. Aside from painting and going to art galleries, traveling, he didn't do much, so he had plenty of time and plenty of money to attack her. Or hire someone to do the job.

She started to picture that. She'd read an article online about Dark Web sites offering "life-ruining services", for-hire services selling stuff like disfigurements, e.g. throwing acid at someone's face, or beating someone with a blunt object and paralyzing or otherwise maiming them; or grapple-fucking or murdering them; or even just spreading online rumors, sending fake or real nude pictures to porn sites; hacking into someone's Twitter or Facebook and posting outlandish tirades; stealing their identity, driving them into debt, all sorts of nastiness. Colin could easily pay for that…

Or he could hire a mob guy or a cartel killer, a professional killer. Just thinking about that made Samantha peer out her living room window, terrified that there was a masked man, hiding in an adjacent building, a sniper, perhaps, who'd shoot her from afar, kill her like Kennedy.

But it didn't have to be done with gunfire. A hitman could possibly poison her. She'd read about that in a thriller novel. A pro-hitman could easily disguise himself as a policeman or repairman, gain entry to her apartment and lace her food with cyanide or anthrax.

Or he could be following her, to and from work, mapping her movements. He could be anyone. Anyone among the knots of people. He could be some inconspicuous bald guy in a business suit, walking briskly by her on a bustling subway, jabbing her in the small of her back with a syringe and she drops dead on the spot and the whole thing looks like a heart attack.

Or a former IRA operative, a killer rigging her apartment with a bomb. Like one of those bombs that could be triggered by opening the fridge or turning on the stove. After thinking of that one, she only ate takeout for a few days, checked all her appliances.

Her mind racing at night, she slept less and less. She could see any of those scenarios. She could see Colin, polishing a gun in his palatial bedroom. Colin, with his strong jaw set, staring with his evil eyes of shit at the nude paintings of her on his walls. Him throwing darts at her portraits. Him concocting all sorts of dastardly schemes to make her suffer.

7

In the following days, fear and its fangs bit at her brain, to the point of exsanguination. The fear drinking her blood. Colin was her vampire. He was her poltergeist. He was invisible, yet everywhere. And she had worsening, terrifyingly vivid nightmares of him as a cat burglar crawling in through her bedroom window at night, and eating her alive, like a zombie. Or him cackle-fucking her with a

broken beer bottle and then slashing her throat, licking sticky spurting bursts of blood off her open wound.

There'd been a recurring dream, too, of his hired mafia goons driving by, in a black Cadillac, shooting her dead in the street like Paul Castellano outside of Sparks.

Colin had been a big fan of horror movies and mafia movies and had watched tons of them with her. Who knows what ideas he was concocting… The asshole could literally pick almost anything from a Stephen King book and try it on her. And he had the cash to get away with it too…

8

But Samantha again summoned her strength. She wouldn't be cowered. This wouldn't be the same as when she was a kid and her abusive father would come home, drunk, and slap the shit out of her and her mom, or lash them with his belt, for no reason, other than he could…

She'd always admired her mother for having the guts to grab her and leave. The pair hand in hand, escaping the house, dashing through the blue-lit living room, while her angry walrus of a father, in his undershirt and boxers, splayed out in his dirty old raggedy recliner chair; his mountainous belly rising and falling as he was snoring like a chainsaw in front of a Monday night football game. Half-eaten Mexican food, and an empty bottle of Jack strewn at his side… The room stinking of nachos and farts…

Samantha decided to emulate that bravery. Take the initiative. Break out of her box of fear.

She terminated her apartment lease early, disguised herself in a wig and trench coat and moved, in the small hours of night, to another apartment in another part of town. She changed jobs. She cut and dyed her hair. She bought a new wardrobe. She deleted her social media accounts and started new ones.

(But she kept a burner account that was friends with Colin's Facebook, so she could track his movements. Worryingly, however, he hadn't posted anything since they'd split…)

9

Still, although she'd moved, covered her tracks, still, there was always the chance he could find her.

She'd be on the subway or at the grocery store, at a bar or restaurant with friends, and she'd think that she saw him. He'd be there. In the corner of the room. She'd clearly see his rubicund face. She'd see him in the oversized Adidas tracksuits he'd wear. She'd see him, from the corner of her eye, so vividly that she'd get cotton-mouthed and icy shakes of terror would barb up her spine. Gasping, her heart would skip a beat. But then she'd look again, and mercifully, he'd be gone. Or just invisible again.

10

Since she knew how into horror movies and books he was, she started wondering if maybe he'd placed a curse on her. So she visited a tarot card reader, who wasn't useful, but a psychic hotline she called was. The psychic had convinced her

that Colin had likely placed a hex on her and accompanied Samantha in an hour-long prayer that was calming and mentally therapeutic.

Samantha decided that she'd fight fire with fire, too, and looked into putting her own curse on Colin, if anything, to cancel out his. She googled witches' curses, Satanic rituals, but settled on buying a voodoo doll on Amazon, and took to stabbing at it, joyously, every night, for a week, with a sewing needle.

But simply stabbing the voodoo doll wasn't enough. Eventually her vengeful smile died. Molded into something else. Bent forward to her kitchen counter, she found herself hyperventilating, seeing Colin's ruddy freckled face, alive on the doll, the serial killer look gleaming in his blue eyes.

With her body quivering in quakes of anger and pain, hot tears streaming down her cheeks, she lost control and shrieked and violently ripped the doll to pieces. Then angrily threw its mangled remains out the kitchen window, watched the serial killer's face float away into the cool drizzly gusts of a starless night.

11

Although it'd been satisfying, stabbing, decapitating the doll, she ultimately decided she was skeptical about voodoo and curses. And she continued to worry Colin might be following her. So she bought a small handgun, started keeping it in her purse, taking it with her everywhere. If he was going to attempt anything, she'd at least try to take him or his goons out in the process. She wasn't going to be the scared little girl, curled into a corner, crying as she received whips from the belt strap.

Hell no!

She was fighting back!

He picked the wrong bitch!

12

At least the party planning lifted her mind off Colin. It was to be a festive occasion; old and new friends would be there. It would be a blast. The twerking male strippers she'd ordered would certainly lighten her mood.

Gosh, maybe one of the male strippers would turn out to be straight. Ask her out. One of them, from the pictures online, was super tall and looked like Chris Hemsworth! "Oh, please let him be straight… And interested… Oh, please, please, pretty please…" she thought and prayed to herself.

Then she went rummaging through her closet and picked out the shortest, sexiest black dress she had to accompany her Catwoman mask, fishnet stockings, and thigh-high shiny black hooker boots.

"He'd have to be gay not to want to fuck THIS..." she thought to herself, trying on the dress, running her hands up her hips, jutting out her round ass and admiring the shapely curves shown in her closet mirror.

13

Finally, Halloween arrived. She coiffed her hair and wore that sexy black dress. And while she'd recently been thinking and worrying less about Colin or his assassins, the threat stayed with her, and came back up in a nightmare she had a couple nights prior, where Colin burst into the party with a machine gun, like a mass shooter, and pulled a Columbine.

Again, she decided that she should protect herself, and, if only for mental reassurance, she should pack her handgun with her, in her purse, take it to the party. Just in case.

14

The party started off without a hitch. No sign of Colin. And in the super pricey, yet splurge-worthy Italian restaurant, they ate an extravagant pasta and lobster meal, guzzled red wine. Then they stumbled out, piling into the stretch limo idling outside, the ladies screaming and laughing and singing and dancing to bumping dance tunes as they rode through the electric pump of the glittery city, over to the swanky nightclub, where they'd get this party REALLY started…

"I gotta feeling!!!" they sang in unison. The limo's surround sound stereo was cranked to full blast, rocking the ladies' bopping bodies with its booming bass, the girls clinking champagne glasses, moving and grooving jubilantly in the limo's cushy brown leather seats.

15

Pouring out of the limo, Samantha looked up and saw heavy storm clouds the color of tar had gathered in the sky above. Then a CRASH of thunder accompanied sudden veils of rain. The group shrieked and giggled like schoolgirls, running

clumsily in their heels, through the downpour, retreating towards the nightclub's neon-lit marquee…

16

Once seated in the club's VIP section, sipping cocktails, the club's thumping trap hip-hop music abruptly shut off. The rowdy group of late 20s, early 30 something tipsy gals were all shocked to then receive a surprise visit from the police. Three tall, handsome uniformed police officers entering from behind the bar. The men with frowns, serious gazes, one of them saying something about a complaint. That it was a serious matter.

"It's a crime that you ladies LOOK SO FINE!!!!" shouted one of the policemen, pointing his finger at Kara, accusingly.

Then a Cardi B song blasted from the sound system, and the police started smiling and dancing and tearing off their police uniforms, revealing sculpted pecs and abs and man-thongs as they bumped and grinded on the now whooping and clapping, twisting and dancing, glass hoisting, hooting and hollering ladies. The smiles on all their painted faces stretched miles wide.

When the Chris Hemsworth clone strutted over to Samantha, he shook his hard ass in her face, then spun around and accidentally kneed her purse.

BANG!

It was like a firecracker, the sound of the gunshot. And a puff of smoke followed it; the gray plume flitting up in the air and dissolving, like an apparition.

Samantha pressed her eyes tightly shut and gasped. Her ears felt as if they'd been stuffed with cotton balls. Then her ears rang in a super high-pitched hum, and she faintly heard something like a scream from a horror flick, accompanied by hysterical crying.

She hung her head, timidly opened her eyes, looked toward the sound of the pop. It had come from her purse. Cringing, she glimpsed down at a tiny burnt black hole in her glittery Gucci purse.

Lifting her head, she saw the Chris Hemsworth clone, in a fallen heap; he was writhing, in a pool of blood, on the club's white marble floor.

His blue eyes bulging, he was screaming, primally. His face a hot mess of agony. And his dark red, dripping wet hands were clamped tightly over his left thigh, which was gushing blood.

NO COMPLAINTS AT THIS PRICE

"It's been a year, maybe a year and a half since I last flew," I say, stuffing my Kindle, water bottle, and a pack of edibles into the seatback in front of me. I pause for a beat, scanning the surroundings, claustrophobia kicking in; then I continue, "Sure is a shame they didn't enlarge the coach cabins while everyone was iced at home."

The stranger by the window seat nods. I picture him forcing a grin. He doesn't seem the type who'd smile much.

The stranger is thin and small, with a distended belly, like a malnourished child's. He's wearing black jeans and a black Metallica "Ride the Lightning" t-shirt and a blue surgical mask that's hoisted up to his eyelids, halving his face. His stringy steel-gray hair spills out of a plain black baseball cap and falls flat just past his frail shoulders. The hat's pulled down so low it hides his eyebrows. There are skull, bones, dagger, and dragon tattoos covering his twiggy arms and a tiny pistol tatted on his pencil wide neck.

He seems like the type you'd see in a prison documentary, with all his tats.

I start to wonder if indeed he was in prison. If he killed someone. Or if he killed someone in jail. I could picture him killing someone in jail, in the shower, with a sharpened toothbrush.

"When was the last time you were on a plane?" I begin to ask, but when I shift my weight in my seat, I find myself in the window seat, and the adjacent two seats are empty.

Then I toss back my head and see the stranger crawling on the cabin's ceiling like a lizard. He's shoeless and his feet appear to have no toes.

Gathering speed, he scampers along the ceiling, shooting toward the business class cabin.

It's been a while since I last flew, but I can't remember there being people on planes who could attach themselves to the ceiling, crawl across it.

I start to tremble; sweat slicks over my forehead. Then the flight attendant scoots by me. She's a chimp, on roller-skates. She makes a squeaky chimp sound as she passes and she smells like a dirty toilet.

Peering around the plane, I see that there are no humans aboard. Only dogs. Every seat is occupied by an emotional support animal, a pit bull, each dog in a red doggie sweater.

None are in their seatbelts. None are emitting animal sounds or barks. All are quiet and still as stuffed animals.

The captain comes on the intercom. If it is the captain… It is only a voice. And to say the voice is tortured… that would be an understatement.

The captain unlooses a series of guttural moans, pained shrieks, and then the address ends in a gunshot.

After the gunshot, I find myself standing, tethered, via duct tape, to a six-foot-tall, one-foot-wide steel pole. Panning my gaze, I see that every seat in the plane is gone, every seat replaced by a tall metal pole.

There are people again in the plane, and the dogs are gone. Each and every person, men, women, children alike, is duct-taped to a pole and is dressed like the stranger from before. Everyone in black baseball hats, identical Metallica shirts, and black jeans, everyone with bare, stumpy toeless feet.

The plane's engine starts up. It roars like five football stadiums full of crazed fans. It's the loudest engine I've ever heard. My ears are in anguish, the ridiculous rumble of the engine deafening me. My ears suddenly seem stuffed with cotton balls.

Two flight attendants in moon suits own the aisles and are pushing a cart filled w/newspapers dedicated to dead celebrities. The flight attendants are with gloves, Freddy Krueger gloves, made of syringes. Up and down the aisles they woosh, stopping at each pole to poke, point and jab needles into arms, administer shots.

I hang my head, see my feet are bare, without toes. Then I lift my gaze, watch out the window. The plane is taxiing, inching forward at a measured clip. But the tarmac is gone. The terminals are gone. We're on an empty highway, in a desert, a barren spit of scorched earth and khaki-colored dirt. Random rock formations flit through the haze like revenants, Rorschach tests.

Ahead in the hazy horizon, there's a megalopolis, a square of a city that's burning in a rainbow of horrible colors, great plumes of gray smoke billowing over its collapsing superstructures.

Panning my gaze to my left, the stranger is back. He's bundled, wrapped and tied, neck to knees, with silvery duct tape, taped to the parallel pole.

The stranger has a voice that sounds like Kermit the Frog doing a Doctor Jordan Peterson impression, and the stranger whispers to me, "You see, this is how they expand the coach section. They tear out the seats, duct tape us to poles, and jab us with bloody knockouts. No complaints at this price."

“No complaints at this price,” I return, just as I scan the aisle and spot a spacesuit flight attendant stuffing a crying blue ball of a baby into the overhead compartment.

Then a needle finds my forearm.

THE ULTIMATE FUCK TRUDEAU SELFIE

Careening toward the Canadian border, we are snow-blind, forcing forward, following fat clouds.

Finally, we arrive. Join the juxtaposition and encounter a lengthy line of snowmobiles, hockey players and Bigfoot. Peering up at the checkpoint, we see motorists collared and searched, probed, and the rectal exams begin, asses hanging from car windows, border-crossers stood spreadeagle, Canuck Grim Reaper Bots extending robotic arms, latex gloves snapping back in coruscating flashes of light.

My Adam’s apple bobs up and down as I dart a glance at a Bigfoot bending over, propped against a plastic palm tree, a gloved Canuck Bot’s hand halfway up Bigfoot’s butt. Then a gust of wind splashes a sheet of snow at our windshield, coloring everything milky, blurry white…

“We should have just snuck in through the woods or taken a hot-air balloon,” Melvin affirms as he’s probing his nose with pliers and plucking nose-hairs meticulously in the rearview mirror.

But what if the Canuck Bots caught you? I ponder…

The Canuck Bots nor the Canucks are usually violent. But they could be, right? All that politeness. All those niceties. I’ll bet inside every Canadian, there’s a raging monster, an anger, a pressure cooker, a bomb waiting to explode. Any Canadian could be a merciless killer given the temptation and opportunity.

An aggrieved Canadian, that could be the world's most dangerous animal. Aside from playing hockey, the world doesn't know what the Canadians are plotting, what they're doing up there. I envisage dark, insidious actors, underground ice-bunkers, and cutting-edge weapons in the hands of polite and helpful neighbors.

"Jeffery Dahmer was a Canadian," mentions Melvin, who's slapping rhythmically on the dashboard, along to the drumbeat of Led Zeppelin's "When the Levee Breaks."

Shaking my head, I proclaim that "no, he was a Wisconsinite… Similar accent, though."

Melvin curls his upper lip in disgust, mentioning that that explains everything, and there are "no worse people than the Wisconsinites."

Oh no, the Canadians are way worse, I insist. Their Mounties are monsters. The Mounties created like Frankenstein, monsters made from assembled body parts, the evil beings born sniffing for blood. Officers of Satan, the Mounties. The Mounties, militaristic, riding on battle moose, moose themselves perfected in laboratories, moose decked out in body armor, moose fitted with jet engines and wings, moose on clandestine flying moose missions; the flying moose fitted with machine guns, missiles, and laser beams blasting from moose asses and antlers.

It's like I tell Melvin, moose run incredibly fast, too, for an animal that size, moose reaching a peak running speed of 35 MPH…

"Even if they don't fly the moose, just imagine those Mounties on moose back, those moose hoofs clattering and the Mounties making morbid battle cries, sounds worse than Celine Dion's most dreadful multi-octave wails.

"Imagine Frankenstein riding a rodeo bull like a racehorse."

"Or a war elephant," Melvin opines, and I nod my head tacitly, and I continue, "It's sinister… Far worse than the Wisconsinites' black bear trampoline terror campaigns and rattlesnake catapult attacks," I assert, plainly, and not even Melvin will argue this…

Our car inches closer. Melvin is practically licking the windshield. The snow slips wet, clearing the screen, leaving us with only the fuzzy outlines of oncoming Canadians.

Melvin has been stirring in his seat. Says the last time he attempted to enter Canada, the immigration officer refused his entry, without explanation, aside from hinting that Melvin looked too poor to be able to fund his stay in Canada.

It's like I tell Melvin, you can't wear dirty basketball shorts in winter and turtleneck trench coats in summer without repercussions… At least today he's in a pink tutu, glasses/nose/mustache disguise and a wrinkly old Wizards Jordan jersey…

The line speeds up, fast. We unbuckle our belts, prepare to be fingered.

"Heck, I might even enjoy it…" I mention, reaching down to unzip my fly.

The stink-hungry border guards are 30ish; they are red-faced men, troglodytes, with slow-moving eyes and potbellies. They only peer at our passports, and one of the border guards pops his head into the car, scans around, then grunts and nods. These Canadians are far gruffer than I'd pictured. They speak in a trembling tone that sounds forced, and one of them only speaks French to us.

But they let us pass, unmolested, and I feel a sense of release ease over me, a burden lifted.

Not Melvin, though. Heading through the Canadian immigration checkpoint has reanimated his PTSD.

Melvin reiterates his negative experience, relives it, and reminds me there are indeed Canadian cunts, that they exist.

"Cunts exist everywhere," I affirm, scratching my eyebrows; after crossing into Canada, my right eyebrow begins to itch incessantly.

Melvin cocks back his bald head. His scruffy red lumberjack beard looks itchy too. He scratches at it again but paws at his face in a way that appears contemplative.

I wonder if the border guards threw itching powder at us or something. I could see the French-speaking one being shifty like that. I didn't like his man-bun. I don't trust a man with a man-bun.

Melvin shares my disdain for the man-bun. Says he hopes to witness a mullet resurgence and rambles about the repercussions of hiding in some bushes, or up in a tree, then jumping out, like a ninja, and snipping off the policeman's man-bun, with a pair of garden shears…

The sun starts to set, the bloody orange ball sinking into the panorama of the purplish-blue horizon. The sky here is heavier than home. The air up here is way cleaner. Everything is cleaner. The streets are so sanitary that they are aglow, gleaming like ice rinks.

Melvin is apoplectic, angrily scratching his face, and still ruminating on the stubborn border guard from two years ago, saying he wanted to go find him and…

We nose into the parking lot at the mouth of the Niagara Falls. The old box Chevy had died so I'd been behind the car, pushing it like a loaded shopping cart for the last three blocks.

Melvin yanks the parking brake, hops out and hurls invective, then spits at the car, kicks the tires, and screams something in Spanish.

The Falls are raging. A violent hiss, a vibration, a smell of powering water wafts and swirls about in the air, and I forget my itch.

Melvin and I pop the trunk. Inside are the squirrel suits. We zip into them.

Melvin laments that America never conquered Canada. That we tried in the War of 1812 and failed miserably. He says we should have annexed Canada and Greenland, a long time ago, for the oil, wood, and maple syrup.

"And the Tim Hortons," Melvin asserts, convincing me that he's a true expansionist, a proud imperialist, the last of a dying breed. "Teddy Roosevelt was America's greatest president!" cries Melvin, climbing the protective fencing.

“I’m partial to Martin Van Buren,” I retort, and I climb up next to Melvin, flanking him. A crowd forms, encircles us. Fingers point, phones aloft. When the police race over, one riding aggressively on a Segway, shouting polite Canadian police things, it is then… it is then that we know… We know the moment has arrived.

“And we’re keeping William Shatner!” hollers Melvin, his head tossed back, his eyes toward the purpling heavens. His nostrils flaring, the veins on his neck popping like cables, he then swivels his gaze toward me, snorts and sneers.

Together, on the count of three…

One…

Two…

Three…

And we dive, face first. FOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOSH… Our plunge propelled by the Lazar engines in our suits. Our dive is like an inverted parabola, first plummeting down, then straightening out, then arcing up and angling to a perfectly parallel, horizontal approach, flying full force forward toward the Falls.

Fooooooooooosh… And we’re zooming like fighter jets over the animosity and immensity and indifference of the pooling water below. Zooming over its frothy white bubbling, its supernatural strength and uninvited violence.

Zooming in a straight soar, we then angle and twist, slip under, bend behind the Falls, the curtain of water, the mammoth of motion, and we glide the tunnel, snap the ultimate Fuck Trudeau selfie and then shoot out the other end, ascending, and we’re over, backflipping a guardrail, touching down to a battered path, paved with blood and broken teeth.

Then we peel off our squirrel suits, disrobe, and run, naked, screaming names of recent Stanley Cup winners. Our naked, hairy man bodies, our shaven chests and backs painted in anti-Trudeau, Banksy-style artworks.

Naked at last, the itch returns, intensifies, overtaking us, as if we’d been bitten by a thousand mosquitoes, and as we run, we stop every few feet to flail, grunt, and scratch. Yet we somehow sustain our suicide sprint in the direction of the border, doing our damnedest to achieve the dash and to meet the simplicity of selection.

WHY I ROBBED A JEWELRY STORE

Not many would suspect it.

Me, a nondescript 18-year-old girl, robbing a jewelry store.

Normally, it's a man who does such things.

I mean, really, robbing a store? Even though it is a jewelry store, and diamonds are, at least according to Marilyn Monroe, "a girl's best friend," but still… It's still, just like, sooooo unladylike.

Seriously. Close your eyes and think about someone robbing a jewelry store. Do you picture a girl? Is that the first image that comes to mind?

Probably not.

I mean, come on, would Marilyn Monroe ever commit an armed robbery?

Probably not.

Nope. When I say "armed robbery" you probably start envisioning, like, some drug addict guy. A wild-eyed freak, a strung-out meth addict, or a pill popper, with missing front teeth, ratty clothes.

Or a thug covered in tattoos, with, like, tons of face tattoos, the type you'd see in a documentary about prison.

Or a criminal gang, professional crooks, with walkie-talkies, and ski-masks, toting guns and duffel bags, an idling getaway car outside…

Oh, or maybe you're thinking of scenes from Michael Bay movies, all that sort of crap, right?

But no. It was me. I did it. Me, a totally unremarkable young girl.

Honestly, it's the first time in my life anyone has ever cared what I did. I'm usually inconspicuous. I'm a plus-size girl, which kinda renders me invisible. No one ever really notices or pays attention to fat girls. Maybe that's why I thought I could get away with it. I've always been adept at disappearing.

Okay, okay, so you're probably like, "Why turn to crime?! Get a job, you bum!" and I understand that. But it's not so simple. Let me explain.

My father died of a heart attack last year. Then three months ago, my mother had one of her feet amputated, due to her diabetes, so now she's homebound.

I'd planned to go to college, to study nursing. Like, I've had a ton of practice, nursing, already, having cared for my mother, so I thought it'd be a suitable career. But after my father died, and especially after my mom's operation, there were just too many bills, and college wasn't an option.

And the costs kept piling up. Medical bills. Rent. Utilities. I'd been working at a fast-food shop, the only job I could get, to help with the bills, but the money I was earning hardly made a dent, and further we sunk into debt.

It's not like we had much saved. My father was a construction worker, didn't make much. My mother was a line chef at a hotel and didn't make much either. Our family is scattered, living in different places, and they are also poor, so it's not like we had a rich uncle to call.

Unable to pay rent, we were facing eviction. Our choices were, basically, to either go live on the street or to somehow pay the rent. Oh, and the back rent too.

So, after watching a movie about a bank robber, I came up with an idea. I'd do that. I'd rob a bank. I'd dash off with a boatload of cash, the type of cash that'd make all our problems vanish.

I thought that'd be the perfect place to rob, a bank, because that's where the money is, right? But I couldn't figure out how to do it and get away with it. I'm no criminal mastermind. And I don't have any machine guns or gang members to help or anything like that. I'd also seen a video about bank robberies that showed

how the banks position buttons underneath their counters that instantly call the police and that the bank employees will sneak a bottle, a bomb, really, hidden in the moneybag, and the bottle will explode when it exits the bank, leaving the robber and money splattered in a crazy, Carrie, horror movie type mess of red paint that takes days to wash off.

No thank you. I'll give that a pass.

Then I thought of robbing an ATM. They're everywhere, right? Why not just walk up to an ATM with a baseball bat or a hammer and smash it open?

I looked into that one too. The ATM machines are built with super-tough materials, like a black box in a plane, and are nearly impossible to open, simply just bashing them.

But robbing a jewelry store… I saw a couple videos about that, including a few where the perps easily escaped… Hmmm… A jewelry store, the thought got my mind spinning… A jewelry store… Just like in the videos… Me… Running in there… Just like those masked men did… Me… Smashing open a display case, snatching a handful of necklaces, rings, running off… That didn't seem too hard. I figured I'm strong enough to do that... Maybe...

So I planned it. I picked out a jewelry store in the next town over. I studied the Google Maps, satellite street views, and I planned my escape route.

The hardest part was finding the right weapon. I really wanted to buy a gun. There is nothing cooler and badder than a girl with a gun, right? Even a fat girl like me could kick ass with a gun… But, sadly, I didn't have the cash for a gun. Which was a conundrum in that I didn't have the money to buy a gun, and that, of course, was the whole reason I was hatching the plan to rob a jewelry store in the first place. Ugh…

This being the case, I settled on a knife. But we only have kitchen knives and steak knives and those are too big and sharp to easily carry and conceal. Then I got an idea. I'd seen a documentary about 9/11, and it'd said how the hijackers used box cutters to seize control of the planes. Jeez, if a box cutter could be used to hijack a plane, it could easily be used to rob a store. And it's also easy to carry.

That was it. I'd go in there, wearing a surgical mask, to cover my face, and then I'd break out the box cutter, brandish it, let the staff know that I mean business. I'd make them raise their arms, like the police does to criminals, and then I'd reach in my backpack, whip out a hammer, and smash open a display case, swipe as much jewelry as I can stuff in my backpack, and run off, jump back on my scooter, and disappear into the blur of traffic.

In addition, what I thought would make my plan even better, was that I often cut my hair short. Since I'm a big girl, with short hair, and if I wore baggy clothes, they might think the suspect was a man. Then the cops would be searching for a man, and not me.

For the next week, I practiced the robbery in my bedroom, like an actor preparing for a role. I mimicked walking in, waving the box cutter, smashing the case, snatching the jewels, and running off. I envisioned it. I timed it. I estimated it would only take two minutes or so. Then I could ride away and pawn off the jewelry, be back home with a fat wad of cash.

When the day came, I thought I might be nervous. But I wasn't. I slept well the night before. It was calming. Liberating. I'd pull off the smash and grab and we'd be free of stress, at least for a time.

Riding my scooter, that cool, sunny spring morning, to the store, I listened to "Bad Guy" in my earbuds and pictured myself as a badass, a warrior. I was wearing all black, black mittens, black sweatpants, black sweatshirt, and a black beanie. I felt strong, powerful, but at ease.

I parked my scooter on the sidewalk and stormed into the store. Then I broke out the box cutter from my sweatshirt's pocket, gripped the square of cold metal in my palm, and approached the counter containing the prettiest and biggest gold chains. The chains were neatly aligned in parallel rows. Price tags, astronomical amounts, denoted under each. Each was worth more money than I could make in

a year. Not only that, but the gold was hypnotizing, how beautiful it shone in the soft, buttery yellow light of the shop. The gold so bright that flecks of light flickered off it in explosive little lightning-like bursts.

I clicked the box cutter's blade up, raised and pointed the small silver triangle of death at the counter bitch's face. The counter bitch, a stout middle-aged lady with an oddly shaped haircut that seemed a tad too long on the right side, had been leaning forward on the display case, staring and thumbing at her phone.

The counter bitch was wearing a mask too, so I couldn't see the expression her lips made, but I could picture them making like an "O" because of the guttural gasping sound she made as she looked up from her phone and her eyes landed on the box cutter. I did my best imitation of a man, growled in a husky voice, told her to raise her arms and step back. Then I clicked the box cutter closed and slipped it back in my pocket.

Slinging my backpack into the crook of my arm, I quickly zipped it open, lifted out the hammer. It was a small hammer, the type for typical home repairs and such, but I figured it could do the job. And it did.

I was surprised at how easily the hammer sunk through the glass, shattering it like a thin sheet of ice.

Then I dug into the case, grabbing heaping handfuls of gold, flinging and stuffing it into my bag. And somehow I noticed the gold didn't seem as shiny once it was in the open, once it was out of the case and in my bag. It was also heavier than I imagined. My bag seemed to weigh 200 pounds as I zipped it shut.

My bag bogged me down, and I felt like I was walking in a swimming pool. But I pushed forward, made my escape. I was surprised that I'd gotten this far. It seemed as if I might succeed, I might actually pull it off.

However, once I passed through the doorway, touched the outside air, there was a pack of the jewelry store's staff surrounding my scooter. The jewelry store employees had angry eyes, and if they weren't wearing surgical masks similar to mine, I'm sure I'd have seen them scowling at me.

They swarmed, formed a circle around me, a perimeter of humanity, a fleshy fence from which I'd have to cut and kick and chop my way through. It was then I wished I were a true badass. I wished I were really a kung fu, action star, and that I could have knocked them all down and out with only a single kick or punch.

I could have tried, I guess. I could have taken out my box cutter. I could have tried to cut my way through them, stab and slash them. But, truth is, I don't have it in me. That day was the first time I'd ever committed any crime. Like, it's one thing to swipe some jewels, but to maim or kill? Nah, that's not me.

My backpack felt heavier and heavier, like it might pull me down, through the sidewalk, down through the ground, to the center of the Earth, and, for a second, I hoped it would, just to get me out of there.

But it didn't and it wouldn't. So I let the bag slide off my back. And I stood there, like a caged animal, encircled by the staff. One of them then barked at me that the police were on the way.

After hearing that, I made a half-hearted effort to run for it, but then two of the staff locked arms and blocked my path before I could get more than a couple steps.

Then I heard the police sirens, the cops roaring in. The cops came out screaming, pointing weapons, and it crossed my mind they might shoot me. But they didn't. In fact, upon seeing me all pathetic and surrounded by the store's staff, they actually began to laugh as they moved in, seized and handcuffed me.

It was probably the first time they handcuffed a girl in mittens.

My plan was a total failure.

I confessed to everything. That I'd done it because of my family's predicament. The judge was an old bird-faced man who spoke slowly, and he took pity on me, since it was my first offense and probably, too, he couldn't help but have some sympathy upon seeing my mom, and her footless leg.

(Not only that, but my mom, while reaching for a tissue, fell from her wheelchair and tumbled to the floor during one of my hearings. Thankfully, she was okay, but it caused quite the stir…)

((Thankfully, too, following my arrest, my mom was able to move in with a cousin in another county and found work at a hospital.))

In the end, I got 5 years in jail, two of the years suspended, although I might be released after one year, with good behavior.

The jail has job training too, and I've enrolled in a program to become a certified nurse's assistant.

2002

"The last time I saw him… Must have been 2002… Wonder what became of him…"

"He was working in real estate, last I heard. Real crap work, too, cold-calling, digging through phonebooks, cold-canvassing…"

"Remember his dad? I remember how his dad would make these pancakes like better than any I ever ate."

"And they'd glop massive slabs of butter on the pancakes, too, like a scoop of ice cream. For real, I'd never seen anyone eat butter like that… His dad guzzled coffee too, jugs of it…"

"That's what happens to heaps of recovering alcoholics. They start smoking like a chimney, drinking gallons of coffee… Or they get really into religion…"

"Or exercise. His dad went from morbidly obese to running marathons."

"Running marathons? His dad? Dude was almost obese enough to land a reality TV show…"

"Yup, I saw it in the local paper."

"You sure it was his dad? And not a doppelganger?"

"I saw it in the paper. I know what I saw."

"And where is ____ ? Still doing that crappy sales job?"

"I don't know. He's not on Facebook."

"He's not on Facebook?"

"No."

"Is he on Linked In or Snap?"

"No."

"Twitter?"

"Nope."

"The 'Gram?"

"The 'Gram?"

"Instagram."

"Oh… Hmmm… Yeah, uh, no…"

"Then how do you know he's even alive?"

"That's a good question."

TO CATCH A THIEF… AND THEN HOLD THE ASSHOLE HOSTAGE

1

I'd come home a bit early from an obligatory Friday night of drinking. Stumbling down the hallway toward my apartment, despite my inebriated state, I had a premonition something was amiss. I was drunk, yeah, but not blackout or vomit drunk. I was still cognizant. Listening to my guts rumble, from both booze and bad

vibes, I unbuttoned my blazer, reached up and lifted out my Glock 19, unclicked the safety…

Pushing open my front door, a bar of yellow light began to widen. Always, and I mean always, I click the lights off before I go out. But the lights were on. And then I saw why, when I spotted the heavily tattooed young man, in skinny jeans and a white T-shirt, standing in my living room. The asshole emptying a shelf of my collectible CDs, DVDs into his backpack!

Then my heart sank as I saw my autographed Dan Marino jersey had been stolen out of its frame on the living room wall!

Fucking with my serenity, swiping my CDs, DVDs, was bad enough. But my Dan Marino jersey… That's way out of bounds… Fucking with Dolphin Dan…

"Drop the backpack, shitbag!" I commanded, holding my gun with both hands. Pointing the barrel right at the youth's chest, the young thug swung his shaved head toward me, his small black eyes popping wide open. Then he turned on his heel, made a run for it but slipped on the hardwood floor and landed on his side, his right elbow piledriving into a puddle of broken glass.

(The cleaners had come today and, as usual, left the hardwood floors slick, unwittingly thwarting the thief's escape plan…)

"Argh!" screamed the intruder. Not only had he bloodied his arm and side, but he'd also landed at an awkward angle. And it appeared that he'd dislocated his shoulder. He was struggling to get up in a pathetic way that reminded me of an insect trying to swim out of a sink or toilet bowl.

But now that he was down, a playful (yet terribly evil) drunken idea ran through my mind, and I decided to embrace it, let the evil in... Have a little devilish fun…

I holstered my gun, lifted a metal baseball bat from out of the umbrella bin by the front door (strange place to keep my weekend league bat, by the door, I know, but I'd rather sleep next to my gun). Then I approached the intruder and proceeded to whap him over the head with a nice hammering blow to his left temple that sent the miscreant straight to the stars.

Confident he was out cold, I patted him down, fished out a small .22 hidden in his waistband. Naughty boy! Then, in his pants pockets, I found an ancient iPhone

with a cracked screen and a Velcro wallet with a faded Golden State Warriors logo on it and only $11 in crinkly ones inside. No credit or debit cards or anything. No wonder this loser was breaking into houses. I'd bet he was the asshole who broke into 4B and 8A.

Looking at his driver's license… shit, born in 2002? The dude was only 21. 21 and this is what he's spending his Friday evenings doing? He ought to be in college, at a nightclub, dancing on TikTok, working his side hustle, or even just jerking off and playing video games in his mom's basement like most dudes his age… Jeez, the fuck is this world coming to…

Then I noticed his name. Luis Javier Gomez… Why did that name seem so familiar?

Then I gazed at his driver's license photo. He looked so sinister. The photo just oozed evil. Maybe it was his slight sneer coupled with the tilt of his long, protruding jaw. Or the vague menace in his eyes. Whatever it was, it was the sort of driver's license photo that if he did a mass shooting or turned out to be a drug trafficker or terrorist, people probably wouldn't be surprised once that photo made its way through the news.

Then my thoughts circled back to my evil idea. Since he wanted to come over for a visit, I figured I should make him my guest. For an extended stay.

I have a spare closet, in my hallway, that's larger than the closet in my bedroom. I use that hallway closet to keep my gun safe, to store my rifles, and nothing else. The closet also came with a design that enables the door to be locked from the outside and is unable to be opened from the inside. What's more, the door's made from thick, solid red oakwood, making it practically impregnable. I'd also set up a camera inside to monitor my gun safe, just in case I experienced any unexpected guests. Like tonight's.

Unknowingly, I'd created the perfect accommodation for my visitor.

I dragged the grimace-faced, incapacitated Luis, by his feet, into the closet and set him down. For a second, I wondered if he was dead. But I hovered a finger under his nose, felt warm, wet pulses of breath, so I wasn't a murderer. At least not yet. But since I had no intention of calling the cops, I was, technically, a kidnapper. However, I preferred to think of my role as more of an enthusiastic host. Maybe a life coach…

After depositing my guest into his accommodation, I rushed into the kitchen, grabbed some packaged foods- chips, cookies, peanuts- and a couple of plastic bottles of water, along with a bucket from the kitchen closet. Then I moved fast back to my new guest's room, brought him his supplies and clicked the overhead light on. But before I closed the door, tucked him in for the night, I decided to dash over to the living room, bring Luis a few books. Then I locked him in and set about cleaning the mess he'd made and retrieving the stuff he'd stolen.

Scooping my CDs, DVDs out of his biggish blue backpack, I began placing them back on the shelf, in alphabetical order too. My guest's unexpected visit had really sobered me up.

I took out my autographed Dan Marino jersey, which, luckily, hadn't been harmed. Then I found a crowbar and saw that Luis had moved through my bedroom and taken my iPad and two gold chains. The fucker had also snatched my grandpa's retirement watch.

My gramps had boarded a boat from Ukraine, as a 10-year-old, to come to America and had slaved in an automobile factory for years upon years, doing back-breaking labor so he could provide a better life for his kids. And he did. And while he didn't make a lot of money, one of the things he most prided himself on was his work ethic. That he woke up, every day, and did backbreaking work for decades. That gold watch and the message from the company inscribed on it had really meant something to him.

Now here's my guest. The total opposite of my gramps. A lowdown thief. A piece of shit who steals the fucking gold watch a man worked for, for over 40 years. Somehow, I couldn't see Luis doing my gramps' job for even a day. At that moment, it was hard to imagine a greater disparity between any two men.

After putting everything back, I cleaned the hallway, swept up the broken glass. I was hoping Luis didn't have AIDS as I washed away the blood. Even if I used latex gloves, still, wiping up another person's blood was discomfiting.

I'd expected to maybe hear yelling and thrashing in the new guestroom. But I heard nothing. I didn't care if he died, really, but a social media mob or a bleeding-heart prosecutor might. Still, I had a clean record and this was a guy with face tattoos. I pay taxes while Luis probably collects food stamps. I donate money

to my local Police Benevolent Association, while Luis likely has served time in jail. No matter what, I figured I'd be good in terms of the law. But I did want Luis to live, though, if only because that might make the next day or two more fun.

As I was finishing cleaning up, I heard a mumble rap ringtone, something about "How can I be homophobic? My bitch is gay!" So I padded over to the living room and picked up Luis's phone from the coffee table and checked its cracked screen.

It was a call from "Julia." Feeling frisky, I decided to touch the green button to answer.

"Hello," I said, happily, and I pictured a startled Julia as she stammered, "Ummm… Hello… is… like… Luis there?"

"Oh yeah, he sure is, but he can't come to the phone right now."

"Who is this?" Julia rejoined after a lengthy pause. She started breathing heavily and sounded panicked.

"I'm Luis's friend. This is Julia, right?"

"Uh, yes, it is," she said, her voice turning from panicked to venomous. "Why?"

"Because Luis told me he thinks you're a total fucking skank. He never wants to talk to you again. He knows you fucked like six dudes last weekend. Two at the same time at a party. He said it'd been cool if you'd banged like two or three dudes, but six? And two at the same time? And they were his boys too? That's messed up, Julia… Luis says his boys say your pussy stinks too. Your pussy fucking stinks like death. Go wash that shit out… Maybe get a new vaginal deodorant… Whatever… Just don't ever call Luis again. You dirty, fucking whore…"

Julia gasped but didn't reply. I hung up and was pleased to see Luis didn't have his phone protected by any code. I was able to dig through his contacts and saw he had many ladies in there. Luis must get around. Time to change that. Methodically, I went through his contacts list and texted each girl similar platitudes as I told Julia.

Feeling even friskier, I checked through his text messages. Most were sexts with random girls I guess he met on hookup apps. But the most recent two were from "miggy," and said simply, "gone go" and "u all good." Thinking "miggy" might be an accomplice or lookout, I didn't reply. But for the other male names on Luis's

phone, I texted them messages saying shit like, “Enuf of dis gangbang shit Imma Tekashi69 im calling tha cops yo I be confessin’ n snitchin on u bich.”

The only contact I spared was the one labeled “gramma.” Then I took out his phone’s SIM card. I used scissors to cut it up, along with his driver’s license, over the waste bin and flung the old phone out the bathroom window facing the alley below. Since I found the window pried open, and the bathroom window leads to the fire escape, I figured I knew how Luis had entered.

Another premonition ran through my mind. “miggy.” Luis, his curiously protruding jaw... Luis’s name- Luis Javier Gomez… Luis resembled and shared a name with one of my building’s newer security guards, Miguel… Miguel Javier Gomez... Both sharing the same protruding jaw… Both looking sort of like a swarthy version of Beavis from Beavis and Butthead...

That “miggy” in Luis’s contacts... Miggy being short for Miguel. That’d make a lot of sense, too, since Miguel often watched the security camera monitors in the control room… And that mine was the third apartment hit in the last two weeks. And with long jaw “miggy,” or Miguel only showing up a month ago… It all made a lot of sense indeed…

Poking my head out the bathroom window, I scanned the alley below… Speak of the devil! I spotted what looked to be Miguel. The uniformed guard pacing, holding his blue-lit phone to his ear, smoking a vape and having an animated conversation. Guess “miggy” wasn’t watching the cameras when I came home early.

I closed the window. Headed to my bedroom. Clicked on my PC. Then I found the feed for the cam in Luis’s guestroom. Luis was still out like a light.

I’d be sleeping pretty well tonight, too, I supposed, knowing the Gomez tag team would strike no more. Thinking sweet thoughts of vengeance and vigilante justice, I got ready for bed, brushed my teeth, flossed and washed up.

Climbing into bed, Julia, Luis’s young skank, floated through my mind and my cock stiffened. I pictured Julia looking something like an In Living Color-era Jennifer Lopez and envisioned her breaking into my house, instead of that tattoo-faced fucktard, Luis.

Smoking hot Julia, in a string bikini top and tiny pair of white jean short cutoffs so tight they had half her voluptuous ass visible. Then the sexy Julia bargaining, unbuttoning her jean cutoffs, sliding down her thong, unsheathing her fresh, fat-lipped, clean-shaved pussy. Julia bending over, her healthy ass pointed right at me. Julia and I working out a deal where I fuck her doggystyle in return for not calling the cops…

Reaching down, I squirted coconut oil on my dick and was soon choking one out to the lustrous fantasy of mounting and riding the sexy young Julia's ass like a jet ski. Then I was drifting off into the warmth of a most deep, pleasant sleep.

2

I woke up early the next morning to hysterical banging, slapping, and screaming coming from my computer. Groggily, I pressed up from the bed. I padded over to the PC, squinting, and saw Luis, in full freakout mode, kicking and slapping at the door. Poor bastard was attempting, to no avail, to kick the heavy oakwood door in.

Good luck with that, Luis. A young guy that scrawny, probably a pill popper or a meth addict or smoking crack. No way a skinny junkie fuck like him could kick in that door.

Luis was looking pretty critical too. He had a big bump on the side of his head, right where I'd whapped him with the bat. His right arm was all gnarly and bloodied up, as well, but it looked like his dislocated shoulder was back in place. The rascal must have popped it back in by himself. Crickey! That had to hurt!

Grinning from ear to ear, I yawned, chuckled and, still in my silk teal Miami Dolphins pajamas, I ambled over to the hallway to chat with my guest.

"FUCK YOU, MOTHERFUCKER!!! FUCKING let me the FUCKING FUCK out!! FUCK YOU! FUCK YOU!!!" He kept repeating. Behind the heavy door his desperate shouts were audible albeit slightly muffled.

"Good morning, Luis!" I cut in, politely as possible, interrupting his outbursts. "How'd you sleep last night?" I inquired, standing by and leaning an ear toward the guestroom door.

A brief pause. The kicking, slaps ceasing.

“You… How do you fucking know my name?”

Faux-outraged I replied, “Hey, Luis, easy there, partner. That is no way to speak to your host. After all the hospitality, after everything I have done for you,” to which Luis didn’t reply.

I turned my tone to cordial, “Look, I left you some food. Did you have breakfast yet? Er, be careful, though, not to pig out. You might need that food to last a few days.”

Still no reply.

“Fucking let me out of here!!!” He finally let loose and resumed fecklessly attacking the door.

“But Luis, why did you come galumphing over here if you didn’t want to stay for a while? It’s rather rude to drop by unannounced too. I think it’s best for you to think about the way in which you interact with your friends...

“I’ve left you a copy of the Bible, the Koran, a book on mindfulness by Sam Harris, as well as a book of the Buddha’s wisdom. So perhaps you can spend some time today discovering spiritual and personal enlightenment. In the end, your stay here could be very beneficial. Maybe after this you’ll become a monk, go move to India or Nepal… Go live and farm on a mountain in the Himalayas… Or maybe go volunteer at an orphanage... Or go join Justin Wren, dig wells for the pygmies in the Congo... You know, just find a better path in life.”

“MAN, FUCK YOU!!!! LET ME THE FUCKING FUCK OUT!!!!” Luis was fuming. I could picture steam shooting from his ears like in an old Bugs Bunny cartoon.

“Listen, buddy, I gotta go to work. That’s what a lot of people do, to make money. They work. They create or construct useful products or perform services in return for money. Some people, like me, even work here and there on weekends. And most hard-working folks like me don’t appreciate uninvited guests showing up and stealing autographed football jerseys, CDs, DVDs, and tablets. Family heirlooms too. Like, if I broke into Julia’s apartment, how would you feel?”

“Ugh, you went through my phone, you fucking freak psycho. I am going to fucking kill you!”

“Oh, I did go through your phone, Luis. And what’s with the ringtone? ‘How can I be homophobic? My bitch is gay.’ Like, is misogyny the best way to counter homophobia, Luis?”

Luis kept quiet. Perhaps culture wars, identity politics weren’t in his purview, and I respected that, so I went on.

“And I had a lovely conversation with Miss Julia. That’s your ‘gay bitch,’ right? Yeah, I told her about you thinking she’s a fucking whore and that you know she fucked 6 guys last weekend. Two at the same time…

“Damn, dude, 6 dicks in one day? Hot stuff! But seriously, did she really? Did she actually fuck 6 guys… Or was it like three that she fucked and three she just blew?

“Look, it’s cool if she did. If she wanted to suck three dicks. I’m not hating. I’m only pissing on your leg.”

Silence ensued, so I pressed further. “It’s kinda cool if she fucks like that. She must do anal too. Wowzer… Man, I bet that pussy must have power. I like a girl who is down to fuck. Is she into older guys, though? She’s your age, like 20, yeah? I bet she is hot. Do you think she’d let me hit it for free? I mean, like, you know, without paying?”

“That’s my fucking sister!” Luis bellowed and followed his proclamation with another futile series of kicks and slaps at the door.

“Ooh, poor her. I sure hope for her sake she doesn’t have any face tattoos and isn’t as ugly and impolite as you, Luis. Oh wait, oh no, no, no, I shouldn’t say that. Look at me being so inhospitable to my guest! You are a bad influence on me.

“Okay, Luis, I gotta go to work. I’ll be back by 6 or so, maybe 10, if I drink with the IT guys again. But we can certainly chat when I return. I’m hoping you’ll be a better interlocutor then.”

Luis stopped kicking and slapping, and his tone turned conciliatory. “Bro, please, would you, just let me out to use the bathroom?”

“That’s what the bucket is for, Luis.”

“Bro, please, I need to use a real toilet… There’s no toilet paper…”

“Eh, you can use your hand. Someone once told me that’s what they do in Turkey. If it works fine for the Turks, it should work for Luis too.”

“I can’t… Please…”

“Mmmm, yeah, not sure about that, Luis.”

“Bro, I swear, you let me go, I don’t say nothing to no one. Just lemme out, please.”

“Perhaps we can strike a deal. If you answer my question honestly, I’ll let you out. Right now. Do we have a deal?” I asked, grinning widely, crossing my fingers behind my back.

“Fine, whatever, please, yes, okay. What?”

“Do you have a brother, cousin, or friend named Miguel, and is he a security guard here?”

A long pause.

“Luis, I’m not hearing an answer…”

“Fuck you! I’m no snitch!” was the acidic rejoinder that eventually arrived.

Ah, yes, the “Code of the Streets,” snitches get stitches and all that. I understood. So I sent a text message to our building’s management company asking them to check the background of Miguel, that I saw Miguel “acting suspiciously” and that I believed him to be involved in the recent robberies. Although I made no mention of tonight’s events. Or my houseguest.

“Alright, Luis, catch you later, alligator!”

As I strolled over to the bathroom to shower up, get ready for the workday, I could hear Luis frantically hitting the hallway closet door and screaming an amusing batch of muffled invective...

In my suit, walking past the hallway closet again, Luis was still at it. Smacking the door, shouting. Maybe he thought the neighbors would hear or maybe he was just venting. But no one would hear him through these reinforced concrete walls.

“In a while, crocodile!” I yelled, smiling and merrily swinging my briefcase as I walked by Luis’s room and out the front door.

3

Throughout my workday I checked in on Luis, using my phone. I saw him eat the salt & vinegar potato chips I’d left him. I saw him spinning the combination lock, pulling at the lever, lamely trying to break into my gun safe. I also witnessed him attempt lunging kicks at the door, trying to batter the door with his uninjured shoulder. At one point he looked like a little sumo wrestler or an offensive lineman the way he crouched and pushed at the door, tried to wedge it from its frame. I also observed him as he bunched up into a fetal ball, shaking as he cried. That part I recorded, took screenshots of… Just in case I needed to (or just felt like) extorting him later.

But, alas, I never saw him pick up the Bible, Koran, Sam Harris or Buddha book. It saddens me that these kids aren’t reading these days. Fucking rapscallion wouldn’t even pick up a book when being held captive in a closet for over 18 hours…

Then I remembered an Australian comedian I’d seen, Jim Jefferies. He’d been bragging, in his act, about how he’d only read one book in his whole life. Only one book. All this to the roaring applause of the crowd. Not reading, not reading books, I’d posit, should be something people ought to be embarrassed to admit. Maybe if Luis read more books, he wouldn’t have gotten taken hostage. But maybe he can be a standup comedian.

As for my guest... What should I do with him? I’d kill him if I had to, but didn’t really want to, and it was too late to call the cops…

I briefly pondered selling him into slavery of some sort. That might teach him a good work ethic. I could auction off Luis J. Gomez’s services on the Dark Web...

But then I stumbled upon the perfect punishment. The perfect dessert to follow the awful entrée of shit I’d already served.

On my way back from work, I stopped by a hunting supply store and bought a blowgun and bag of tranquilizer darts. When I got home, I checked the guestroom

cam on my phone and saw that Luis was sitting balled up in the corner, looking passed out. The bump on his head had really swelled up too... Fucker almost looking like a hammerhead shark…

Quickly I opened the door and shot Luis in the arm with a tranquilizer dart. Then I recoiled at the pungent stench of Luis's body odor coupled with the reek of his excrement in the bucket. But I wasted no time following through with my plan...

On TV and in movies, especially Dexter, if you stick someone with a syringe or shoot someone with a tranquilizer dart, they instantly crumple, pass out.

But it's not usually like that in real life.

The fellow with the long beard at the hunting shop explained that it takes at least a minute or two for the tranquilizer to set in. Could be up to a few minutes, the larger the animal, he'd warned. So, after blasting Luis, I slammed shut and locked the closet door, waited about 10 minutes, played a couple hands of online poker on my phone and then returned. By that point he was definitely out.

Upon entering Luis's room, I ground my teeth and again crinkled my nose at the stink cocktail of Luis's body smells mixed with his piss and shit. Maybe I should have left the asshole a stick of deodorant. Then I chuckled for a second, seeing Luis had wiped his ass with a sock. Then I put my plan in motion.

First, I stripped him naked. In the process, however, I noticed Luis either had a very small penis or was just a grower. Either way, I decided to take advantage of the situation and snapped a series of smartphone pics of a naked Luis and his small dick. Just in case I needed to (or just felt like) extorting him later.

Luis being a small person, maybe 5'6 and scrawny, I was able to easily stuff his entire body, along with his .22, which I unloaded, into an extra-large duffel bag. To be safe, though, I locked the zippers together with a padlock. Then I set out, still in my 3-piece suit from work, and with my sleeping guest stuffed in the duffel bag slung over my shoulder. When I left my building, none of the building staff even gave me a second look…

I noticed too, passing by the security guards, that Miguel was gone, which made me happy.

I remembered the gang tattoo I'd seen on Luis's arm and went online and found that street gang's rival. I crossed the causeway, drove down to their neighborhood, parked in an alley, popped the trunk and lifted out Luis. After unlocking the padlock, unzipping the bag, I rolled him out, onto the pavement, set him down by the dumpster. I placed his gun next to his side and threw a handful of his bullets down toward the other end of the alley… Figured I should be magnanimous, give the kid a fighting chance…

Luis was snoring as I hurried off but appeared to mumble something when I opened the car door. Then, purposely, I backed out and reversed over Luis's legs, to which he awoke screaming.

This was the sort of gang-infested neighborhood that a lot of guys driving a Benz, wearing a nice suit, generally wouldn't want to enter. But the whole area appeared a lot nicer than I expected and I exited unscathed. Although the wild car ride sequence through the Bronx from Tom Wolfe's The Bonfire of the Vanities rushed through my head as I approached the highway. Fortunately, I fared better than Sherman McCoy and Maria Ruskin.

As I accelerated up the on-ramp, merged into traffic, I was really hoping that Luis had read at least a few pages from one of those books. The kid could use a bit of spirituality and/or mindfulness. In fact, these days, we all probably could.

JEW FOR JESUS

"You know Ari never had a full-time job."

"His partner said that a lot of people thought Ari was a rich man."

"People thought Ari was rich because he was Jewish, and his father owned properties. But his father wasn't hedge fund manager rich."

"And his father didn't leave any money to him. His father left everything to his younger brother."

“The understanding was that his younger brother, Ben, would send him an allowance, like his parents had been doing.”

“But that wasn’t what transpired.”

“ … “

“Ben went full religious. He’d met and quickly married his first real girlfriend. An evangelical Christian lady from Mississippi. This sharp-elbowed, short, pug-nosed lady who wore heaps of make-up and spoke with a gravelly Southern drawl...”

“I met her once… I can still recall the heavy, noxious odor of her perfume, her crazy long fingernails, and frilly, tacky clothes…”

“Ben met her by Times Square. Guy used to sneak over there to go to the peep shows, Ari’d said…”

“She was with her church group, passing out Bibles or something.”

“ … “

“Then Ben became a Jew for Jesus.”

“ … “

“Ari really blamed Joan, too, Ben’s wife, for corrupting Ben, polluting his mind with the Jesus stuff.”

“But hey, for some people, religion really benefits them. Ben was a total slacker who went to peep shows and spent all day watching TV. But after he got religious he was a changed man. He went from living with his parents, at 33, to working his way up the corporate ladder at an investment bank. The guy went on to head a division in Mergers and Acquisitions. Even got featured once in the *Wall Street Journal*.”

“Ben was at _____ ___, right?”

“For 40 years…”

“Jesus…”

“… yeah, but Ben hid the Jesus stuff pretty well. He only pushed it on Ari and their parents. He never once talked about it with anyone else in the family…”

“Ben could never bring his brother or their old man to Jesus, but he did ‘convert’ their mother on her death bed.”

“If you wanna call that a conversion… The lady was a vegetable, gone with dementia, had lost all her marbles…”

“ … “

“Okay, sure, it seems superfluous. Their parents leaving the money to the son making 6, 7 figures. But look, think about it, who’s gonna be more responsible? An executive at an investment bank? Or Ari, Matoosh, or whatever, living with a yoga cult, in Death Valley? This dude who never had full-time employment…”

“Matoosh?”

“Ari had changed his name to ‘Matoosh’ for a while, was demanding that everyone address him as ‘Matoosh.’”

“And it was around then that he started wearing his trademark bandannas.”

“Some thought he wore those due to his obsession with the writer David Foster Wallace. But Ari claimed DFW swiped the bandanna thing from him, after they’d met briefly, at a Don DeLillo book signing…”

“It was around the Matoosh time, too, that Ari began wearing those Burmese longyis…”

“And it was around that time that he decided he was gay. Then he started living with something of a new-age yoga cult in Pahrump, Nevada, near Death Valley...”

“I’m sure none of this sat too well with his parents…”

“Matoosh, the longyis and bandannas, being gay, the yoga… His parents were conservative, second-generation Russian Jews. Ari’s grandfather was a rabbi…”

“It’d caused quite the stir when Ari got up and demonstrated the ‘downward-facing dog’ at a seder.”

“Jesus…”

“I mean he was living in Pahrump, Nevada… I mean… Pahrump… And calling himself ‘Matoosh’…”

“Ari apparently got quite angry too if you didn’t refer to him as ‘Matoosh.’”

“Living in the desert, in Pahrump was a big reason why hardly anyone in the family ever went to visit him. It was just so hot and remote…”

“His parents could have bought him a house in a place that didn’t have ‘death’ in its name and wasn’t hot as a furnace.”

“Or, like, the money could have gone to charity.”

“So Matoosh wasn’t enough of a charity case?”

“ … “

“Ari became an avowed pacifist around that time, too. Getting involved and volunteering at lots of hippy, antiwar, anti-violence organizations...”

“ … “

“Really everything between Ari and Ben went sideways, though, after their parents died. Their parents were accepting of Ari’s homosexuality, his ‘lifestyle,’ as his father called it…”

“Ari’s parents actually seemed far more uncomfortable with the yoga…”

“ … “

“First their father had a deadly, freak accident at the Serenoa Golf Club.”

“The Serenoa?”

“The Serenoa Golf Club.”

“The guy was out golfing alone, early morning. Got attacked by a swarm of wasps and drove his golf cart into a lake. Drowned to death…”

“It was in the papers. Front page of the *Sarasota Herald-Tribune*.”

“Jesus…”

“Then their mother died. And after their mother died, Ben let it rip. Started calling Ari ‘disgusting’ and saying that it was ‘Ari’s fault, Ari’s fault that Ari was gay.’ Then he insisted Ari ditch his partner, stop doing yoga and start taking gay conversion classes.”

“That didn’t happen, and Ari took his younger brother to court, tried to sue for the inheritance.”

“ … “

“… But Ari’s legal efforts were to no avail. The will was signed, sealed, delivered. Written in plain English. It was airtight. There was nothing in the will for him. No property. Zero dollars. Nothing. And that whole ‘Ben providing Ari an allowance’ or whatevs was only a handshake agreement.”

“Ben’s lawyer had the case thrown out before it got anywhere.”

“After the suit got dismissed, Ari proclaimed that he’d ‘divorced his brother.’ I don’t think they ever spoke again…”

“Ben, Joan and their Jesus clique are quite polarizing… I don’t think I’ve even seen Ben this century... I heard through the grapevine that he has this stupid crib in Sanibel Island and that he’s been wintering there and summering in the Hamptons... And I heard Joan spends part of the year in Iceland… Their two sons are both bankers at _____ ____, following in their old man’s footsteps...”

“ … “

“Why didn’t Ari just get a job? His old man, Ben, anyone could have put him on…”

“… pink bandannas, Burmese longyis, spontaneous outbursts of yoga, demanding to be addressed as ‘Matoosh’… None of that goes over well on Wall Street…”

“My Pops was always on him, always pushing Ari ‘to do something with his life…’”

“For a while Ari tried to make a living as a poet… He’d done a yoga course in India, too, became a certified yoga instructor. But he never taught yoga as a profession.”

“So he never had a full-time job?”

“Nope. He claimed he couldn’t work because ‘he couldn’t.’”

“ … “

“Ari was quite coddled as a kid. He was a child of that post-Holocaust generation. That generation thought of every child as a miracle beyond miracles, treated them like Fabergé eggs... His mother always cooking him food, picking up after him, letting him do whatever.”

“With parenting like that it shouldn’t have been surprising he had problems working… Showing up to an office every day. Someone all in his face, telling him what to do…”

“Then at some point Ari started writing new-age, self-help books. Then he tried getting his self-help books published. To no avail.”

“Part of me thought that because he had big teeth and was tall, that he could be the next Tony Robbins…”

“You know, I sorta liked Jacinda Ardern, and I think part of it was because she also has big teeth. There’s something striking and powerful about a person with big teeth…”

“ … “

“It’s just… I didn’t know. I didn’t know Ari was sick. No one knew about his heart condition. No one, aside from his partner.”

“...Ari was walking with a cane and confined to his couch, those last couple a’ years. He was bitter too. He hated not being able to do yoga or go teach his yoga classes at the prison. His partner told me Ari was spending most of his time eating hummus, drinking apple juice and watching the *Daily Show* and Oakland A’s games…”

“Ari always watched a lot of TV. I think he watched more TV than Chauncey Gardner.”

“Ari had told me he’d send a box of family photos and stuff. But I never received it. He’d also told me that I was ‘in his will.’ And I thought that might mean the old Harley he had in the garage, which he’d once said he wanted to leave me. I’d have taken that. But it wasn’t that.”

“ … “

“I discovered that Ari left $6,000 to split between me and three other people. So I just told his partner to keep it and to only send the family photos.”

“Ari’s net worth was about $6,000.”

“His partner worked as a nurse, in Pahrump, and had bought their house, was paying the bills.”

“$6000… Bro… That’s a friggin’ first-class ticket from NYC to London…”

“Six thousand dollars.”

“Jesus…”

“I had no idea. But he never said anything. Never asked for help…”

“I was on him to do something with his Dahmer story… Write a book or make a movie…”

“Dahmer? Jeffery Dahmer?”

“Yup. Back when Ari was trying to be straight, he dated, of all people, Jeffery Dahmer’s mother.”

“And they remained friends for the duration of their lives. I have a picture of them together, arm in arm…”

“Jeffery Dahmer could have been your cousin.”

“I know right? Six degrees of something terrible...”

“ ... “

“Despite Dahmer’s crimes, abhorrent crimes, I mean, killing and eating people, necrophilia… Ari always had a soft spot for him. Called him ‘Jeffery.’ Said he saw Jeffery as a lost soul, blamed Jeffery’s father for everything... And Ari even had a long letter-writing correspondence with Jeffrey.”

“Ari told me he cried when Dahmer was murdered in jail.”

“Remember that Black lady, in court, hysterically screaming: ‘I hate you, Jeffery Dahmer!!!’? That lady who was all jumping up and convulsing with anger, getting restrained by the bailiffs… She probably didn’t share that sentiment.”

“I googled her... Rita Isbell… I saw a clip of her praising Dahmer’s killer.”

“Serial killer stuff might make for entertaining movies. But if your friend or loved one were among Dahmer’s victims… Like, yeah, I doubt Rita was watching the Netflix Dahmer movie.”

“Reminds me of this incredible one-man show I saw, by a comedian, Anthony DeVito. This dude discovered, at age 18, that his father was a mafia hitman that’d

been shot and killed and found hogtied in the trunk of a car. I doubt that dude wants to watch *The Sopranos*…"

"Wait… Danny DeVito? The actor? Was a mafia hitman?"

"Nah, it's another DeVito…"

" … "

"Bro, I'm so, so sick of all these true crime shows, murder shows and podcasts."

"I liked it better when there were only one or two murder shows."

"I bet that jerkoff who killed those college kids in Idaho was a fan of murder TV shows and podcasts. I bet that stinkin' jerkoff streamed the Dahmer movie like ten times."

"That Netflix Dahmer movie really pissed Ari off. After it came out, he and his partner canceled their Netflix subscription. Then Ari wrote Netflix a series of angry letters."

"Handwritten letters too… Envelopes, stamps and everything…"

"Ari was apoplectic, talking about 'if a member of Reed Hastings' family got murdered by a serial killer, Netflix wouldn't be showing Dahmer and Bundy crap'… That 'Netflix probably wouldn't find serial killers too sexy and cool then'…"

"Ari just developed a seething hatred of Netflix CEO Reed Hastings. Like the way liberals hate Trump, and how conservatives hate Hillary or Obama. That's how Ari felt about Reed Hastings."

"I think his Dahmer connection was why Ari did the volunteer yoga teaching gig at the prison. Why he believed in those inmates."

"Teaching yoga at a maximum-security prison…"

"You know Ari had a long letter-writing correspondence with Kip Kinkel, too, the mass killer. They'd connected through yoga. Ari considered him a friend, supported his release."

"But Ari's partner told me that Ari had all his Dahmer and Kinkel letters shredded upon his death. Ari didn't want any of that finding its way to a 'murderabilia' site."

“Hence probably why Ari didn’t write a book or make a movie or documentary with Dahmer’s mother.”

“Ari always saw the good in people.”

“Except for Reed Hastings… And Ben and Joan… And Israel... Oh, man, he just despised Israel.”

“Normally it’s only those Hassidic type of Jews, you know, the ones with the sideburn curls, black hats and big beards who hate Israel.”

“And Norm Chomsky.”

“Noam Chomsky…”

“Noam?”

“Noam.”

“How do you spell that?”

“N-O-A-M...”

“No-am.”

“No, you pronounce it like ‘gnome.’ As in gnome, like the mythical creature, or gnome, like a garden gnome, you know?”

“Noam?”

“Noam.”

“Not Noah?”

“No.”

“Not Norm?”

“No. Noam.”

“So… did he ever visit Israel?”

“Who? Norm Chomsky?”

“Noam!”

“No, not Chomsky, Ari…”

“Ari did, yeah. After India, he visited Israel and briefly lived on a Kibbutz.”

“He’d had something of a ‘Jewish Prophet’ phase, where either he thought he might be the messiah or that he might find the messiah in Israel…”

“But this is different from the Matoosh phase?”

“Yeah, no, Matoosh was a different time in his life.”

“After Israel, Ari volunteered at a potato farm in Ethiopia, then went backpacking through Europe.”

“Then while he was in Germany, he had this super-intense dream that he was standing in line, in what looked like a death camp. And he was next to this little red-haired girl, maybe 5 or 6 y/o, and that this little girl had these dimples and freckles, and was like the most adorable, most innocent girl he’d ever seen… After he woke up, he said he spent an entire day, in his bunk bed at the hostel, just crying.”

“That’s why he tatted the pink teardrop on his face…”

“Bro, Ari wouldn’t have done well in the Holocaust, being gay AND Jewish…. And antiwar…”

“And practicing yoga…”

“ … “

“… but Ari just hated Israel. He’d stand up, throw stuff, yell and spit at the TV if he saw anything about the ‘Zionist Occupation.’”

“He had a watercolor painting in his living room of a young Arab boy throwing a rock at an Israeli tank…”

“He always rooted for the underdog.”

“Like with everything. Sports too… He hated the Yankees. Though that could have been because his brother’s a big Yankees fan.”

“But Ari also detested Duke basketball, the Cowboys, and the Lakers. I think he saw the Palestinians as like the Oakland A’s or the Sacramento Kings or something…”

“I’m not sure Ari would have done well living in Palestine. Or Riyadh. Or anywhere in Saudi Arabia…”

“I know right? It was weird, his passionate, anti-Israel stance. Since homosexuality is so severely criminalized in the Middle East. Everywhere except Israel. Like, if he were in Gaza, he’d be lynched.”

“Eh, I think his hatred of Israel was more in relation to his younger brother. Ben and his wife’s church are big-time Israel supporters.”

“Maybe it was because of Ben, too, that Ari eventually became an atheist.”

“He’d gone from Jewish to Buddhist to Hindu, back to Jewish, for a few years, then tried to be a Sikh, I think… But once he discovered Sam Harris, he never looked back…”

“I wonder what happens to atheists when they die.”

“ … “

“I talked to Ari’s partner the other night. I saw on Facebook that it was his 76th birthday, so I gave him a shout.”

“They never got married?”

“Nah, but they talked about it.”

“Ari said that despite being together for almost 40 years, he wasn’t sure they ‘knew each other well enough.’”

“ … “

“It was around Thanksgiving that Ari died…”

“We both miss him.”

POETRY

YOU!

You!
went psychotic afternoon
acted invisible and chased after imaginary cats

You!
went really red rover
and Flamenco danced at a fortune teller

You!
rushed off on roller-skates,
after performing the Heimlich on a mannequin

You!
set fire to your feet
and played Frisbee with stolen toilet seats

You!
sucked off a Salvation Army Santa
and ran off Riverdancing

You!
spray-painted stanzas of Beatnik poetry
and puked on every public library

You!
started stupid new dancing plagues
and catfished Karen suicide cults

You!
went fishing with your bare hands
and called it performance sushi

You!
really licked random people in frog suits
and called it floppy lollipops

You!
guerrilla exploded empty empathy tanks
and went vigilante snowman with whip cream cans

You!!!
really whispered
what I didn't wanna hear
You!!!!!
really bit off my ear
and called it true romance

You… You… Oh, you!!!

You called for
calisthenics and cannibalism
and practiced performance veganism

You understood
umbrellas were parachutes
and purposely padlocked airport bathrooms

You sipped
Psilocybin Bourbon Bitters,
and did angry ballet behind a Burger King

You plucked
pubic hairs with pliers,

and called it performance topiary

You sucked off
Ari Shaffir
and called it heckling

You hyperventilated
and imagined progress
You bought an AK-47
and begged for world peace

You!!!!
did it all
YOUR way,
on your OWN terms…

You went without
reading palms
You went without
breaking mirrors
And that's exactly
what I like about you

POSITIVITY IN A NOPE

NO ride,

that's given

to gangster body parts

is going to be floating like plastic bottles

is going to be swimming like porpoises

NOT

in this canal's piping

NO ride,

That's given

will ever be more than the most penurious monk

OR lab rats, drunk on digital feelings

And no, while your temper

may move quicker than lizards in toilets,

it remains the darkest of all my daydreams

Mr. Gum Disease Capone,

your tropical misery is a super yup genesis!

that's a given

But darling, there's a frog in my mouth

a mass, a mountain of sugar in a distance

it's a give

a give for the take

a muck for the rake

it's a given

Show me, show me

Show me your hands

Show me

your social security number and

your mother's twinkle toes and your ugliest Xmas sweaters

and your angry football coach rants that are still warm and fuzzy

It's a given

I'll give you that

I'll give you twenty-five reasons not to go

I'll give you that

a punch in the arm

a cost to doing business

a sauce, a sizzle to the soul

I'll give you that

Happy happy me

Happy happy me

Have me laughing during dick surgery
Have me kick open an emergency exit
puke jungle juice and jump out the plane
It's a given

You give me twenty-five of that
You give me another reason
never to search for the fog
You give me an excuse and a diagram
You show me that it's a given

there's positivity in a nope

BARBIE GIRL

Barbie and I were classmates
in sixth grade

Unlike most girls
Barbie sat
in the back of the classroom

I always wanted to talk to Her
because She was beautiful
Of course, of course
She was beautiful
She was Barbie!

Barbie had blue blue eyes
bigger and brighter
than the brightest summer skies
and gold gold hair, in ringlets
finer than the finest jewels

Barbie was the first girl
my age
with legs

To me, Barbie
was even prettier
than girls on TV

And like TV
I'd watch Her
… as She got
more intriguing than GI Joe…

… me, Her secret admirer
watching Barbie Girl
as She stared out the window
head tilted, looking so cute
long legs crossed
chewing on Her lower lip

But as I studied Barbie
better than schoolwork
I started to notice
dark blue blotches
on Barbie's thin arms,
a blue so dark
… damn near black
… a dark
in such stark contrast to the
color of Barbie's eyes

Then Barbie came to class
two days before Halloween
limping like a zombie
with a black eye
and Her right arm
in a white sling

and I recalled
Barbie looked so sad
and I wanted so bad, to say
Something, anything
to make Her feel better
but I didn't have the words

And I never got a chance
to cheer Her up
because Barbie vanished from school

All these years later
in another millennium
I still don't really have the words
but, Barbie, if You're out there
just know
that I hope You pursued,
found happiness
whatever that is
and please know
You weren't forgotten

CORONAVIRUS PATIENT ZERO

Coronavirus, COVID-19

Sars2

the “Wu Flu”

Patient Zero

who are you?

where are you?

and how did you

catch the monster?

Did you

catch it from a bat?

a civet cat?

from a lab? A scab?

from barbecued rats at a wet market?

PERHAPS A PANDA OR A PANGOLIN?

Do you know?

that YOU are

the ultimate super-spreader

did you know?

that it was from your breath

your blood

your touch

your spit

that ALL THIS

is history

ALL THIS…

TELL US

let the record show…

WHAT DID YOU KNOW

AND WHEN DID YOU KNOW IT?

TELL ME

… DID YOU SEE?

the grim reaper on a respirator!?

DID YOU KNOW?

do you know?

ARE YOU ALIVE?

did you die?

are you in a Chinese jail?

chained to a wall?

or in the cotton fields
with Uighurs in chains
or toiling in Tibet…
or dead as the Falun Gong,
or dead as Hong Kong…
or are you in a padded room
GOING INSANE

Or are you in heaven with Doctor Li?
or crawling in a cave, in Yunnan

or are you wearing pants?

Are you in France?

And is your name *really* Huang Yanling?

Or were you
a pensioner seeking scraps
an accountant of maps?
a seller of bats?
an eater of cats?
a user of WeChat?
or another worker

at the Wuhan Institute of Virology
dropping beakers like babies…
or was your hand
bitten by humanized mice?

And
are
you
nice?

WHO ARE YOU?
are you a Chad or Karen?
WHERE ARE YOU?
are you in a kitchen?
chopping chicken?
listening to K-Pop, nonstop,
or are you still mad about THAAD?
are you in Wuhan or Hebei?
are you in Spain?
are you in pain?
or are you in a shopping mall?
are you laughing?
did you have a diagnosis?
and pray tell us all:

Where did YOU spend YOUR quarantine?

DID YOU HEAR? SMELL? SEE?
the genesis?
And HOW WOULD YOU FEEL?
if you KNEW, for sure,
that you, from your hands
from your belly
from your vowels
FROM YOUR MOLECULES
lashed the droplets
brought the blood
birthed the seed
of the beast in its crown
That weighed so heavily on humanity's head…

MOON MAN

Moon Man shoved a beer bottle
up his butt
then threw his blow-up doll
off the balcony

Moon Man then proclaimed
he'd made merit
to all but the most gullible gods

Whenever Moon Man drank
he tore off his clothes
and fought with walls
he wheezed and wept
stuck bottlenecks up his ass
and even offered sex for science
but Moon Man only had fun
because he didn't know
what was already done

Whenever Moon Man
woke to night terrors
he would drink more whiskey
then he'd wonder
just how do you kill a ghost?
can you use a vacuum cleaner to catch a ghost?
and when is a blessing simply a curse?

Moon Man shaved his head
made amends

then illegally downloaded

two self-help books

1) *How to be an Alpha Male*
2) *How to Win Friends and Influence People*

then he bought a gun

PERSPECTIVE

The stink of the city

Varies

Depends on your location

Your limitations

Your tolerance to foresight

Your view of

high-rises,

mud-huts and tin roofs

HOMELAND OF THE NEW MAN

You said
they were doffed,
mangled meaning.
You trundled,
licking blood off your baton
Your bombs,
liberation parade
You saw
fulminating,
painted steps
snowy swastikas
tickle attacks at the Potala Palace.
there they prostrated.
sextons in the brown skin.
animal Feudalists,
serfs strafing,
making maledictions.
scraping, straddling,
stabbing the People,
missing teeth moues.
gasoline showers
and You, YOU galumphed
You slipped

cigarettes, cannulas
invisible hands. Funky ghosts,
You built
camps
from muddy culverts
interlarded in ice
with apocalyptic armaments and
your bifurcated vagaries set in train
You estivated
in diamonds, blood hills,
biding your time,
biting your lower lip.
building your defenses
stacking your reserves
New men. NEW MAN.
Not geldings, not eunuchs.
New men.
No never men
nadirs of New nations.
No never paucity
Five Yellow Stars.
Red tongues, corpulence
perpendicular ideals
of Marxist nourishment,

mendicancy, into

Convenience or Death.

CANCEL CULTURE

This is not a story. This is not literature.

This is a spit in the face.

A kick in the nuts. A punch in the tit.

A shooting spree,

of consonants and vowels, aimed at snowflakes.

This is to be loathed. This is to cause anger.

This is to be deleted, blocked, downvoted, canceled and hated.

Demonetized

by coding corpses in Silicon Valley

It is my hope a Twitter Mob forms,

curses my name, relegates me to Louis CK status.

This is my penis and I take it out

a dark web palm reader for the snowflakes.

This is my penis and I take it out

to piss on the face of all Boomers, Gen Xers

and especially the Millennials and Gen Z

You who have grown with smartphones akin to limbs,
priapic pineal glands, ophthalmic screens…

You who have “emotional support animals”
I hope your emotional support animal
mauls you to death like an Alaskan grizzly bear
and you fucking die like that execrable Australian crocodile cunt

You who have “safe spaces”
I want to rig your safe spaces
with prepositions, adverbial pipe bombs
and laugh as they explode like an Ariana Grande concert

Yes, YOU, you snowflakes…

You who have transformed young America
into a coddled wasteland
of mock outrage, moaning prudes

You who subscribe to video game streams on YouTube
You who pay punk ass PewDiePie his millions
while the greatest living poet in America works as a janitor!

You who fight over bathrooms
You who bastardize legitimate arguments,
shame those who marched
shame those who righteously died

You who vote Republican and Democrat
You who watch CNN, MSNBC, and Fox News
You who wish to silence creators
You who are triggered
You who can't take a joke
You who can't fathom opposing views
You who Yelp, write online reviews
in braille
You who protest Joe Rogan and Dave Chappelle

You, you snowflakes: I want to reach into your toilets
to smear myself in your shit
and kick at your cunts and balls as you whine online about my blackface

I want to punch your nose
paint myself in your blood and attack your colleges
with wadded up copies of The Naked Lunch and Tropic of Cancer

I want to hack Spotify
replace every playlist with Public Enemy on a continuous loop
and blast 2 Live Crew
from loudspeakers down every boulevard in Northern California

I want to hog-tie conservatives, make them watch gay porn
I want to hog-tie liberals, make them watch monster truck rallies

Because your phone can block
Your phone can delete
But energy cannot be destroyed

And ART, speech, thought
Are the purest form of energy
The very flesh of emotion…

Currency both malefic and supernal!

And now, snowflakes
now I tie your noose
I grind my knife to your throat
I aim my AK at your temples
Just to tell you this:

Sticks and stones can break my bones

But words will always nourish me…

Let there be commerce!

******* ALL WORKS COPYRIGHT 2023 METH LAB PRESS *******